

WARRIORS, POETS, FRIENDS
MY LIFE IN THE MINDANAO MOUNTAINS

Joven Obrero



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

TALES FROM THE FRONT

A Collection of Revolutionary Stories and Poetry

Communists are known for our reliance on and understanding of theoretical knowledge. Our conception of education and self-education comes directly from Lenin's famous formula: "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." Yet, in our ongoing effort to acquire practical and theoretical knowledge, it may be necessary to engage with historical accounts of concrete struggles in which theory was both forged and applied in the sometimes murky complexity of real life. *Tales From the Front* aims to provide activists with concrete historical examples—both fictionalized and non-fiction—of those instances in which theory and practice mutually produced and intertwined with each other.

Illustrations: First Child

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for Teodora

Preface

It is highly gratifying to read Joven Obrero's *Warriors, Poets, Friends: My Life in the Mindanao Mountains*. She shares with us her rich revolutionary life of struggle and service to the people in excellent literary style.

The book is well constructed. It is a unique alternation of inspiring and delightful poems and short prose narratives. The poems are intensely meaningful and passionate. The narratives define the moment and the sweep of events from one period to another.

I found the book so compelling after reading just a few pages that I could not set it down. And I would recommend that readers read it in one sitting to be able to best understand and enjoy it. Subsequent readings are further enriching and enjoyable.

The book succeeds as a concentrated expression of the author's revolutionary commitment to wage the people's democratic revolution, do hard work and make sacrifices to overcome tremendous odds, fight the enemy and create new things with the people in order to empower them and advance the revolution.

The author begins the book by narrating the difficulty of climbing a mountain and the joy of reaching the destination after twists and turns and ups and downs. She exalts in learning from various tribes of the indigenous people and the poor peasant settlers.

She defies the enemy and is driven to fight the evils that plague the toiling masses of workers and peasants. Thus, she is encouraged to engage in the mass work needed to create the guerilla bases and zones and the capabilities for carrying the people's war forward. In the cycle of life, she joyfully celebrates the mother's birthing of the first child.

She demonstrates how dialectics operates concretely and compellingly in relations between the revolutionaries and the enemy as well as within the revolutionary movement. The contradictions extend to her own struggle with cerebral malaria and the people's struggle against natural calamities caused and aggravated by the exploitative logging, mining and plantation corporations.

For all the victories that the people and the revolutionaries have won, Joven Obrero offers elegies as supreme tribute to cadres, couriers, gay comrades and others who sacrifice their lives in the service of the people. Towards the end of the book, she revisits her parental home and pays homage to her peasant father. She also reunites with siblings who have gone abroad to earn a living and never to forget the travails of their motherland.

The poetry of Joven Obrero is in simple, rhythmic and lyrical lines, witty and heartfelt, and full of subtlety and grace. Even as she is a unique poet with her own style, she bears the influence of the poetry of Mao, Ho, Neruda and Galeano. I, too, have been influenced by these poets.

Joven Obrero's book is a worthy contribution to the 50th anniversary celebration of the Communist Party of the Philippines. It reflects essentially the revolutionary struggle not only in the mountains and plains of Mindanao but also in Luzon and the Visayas.

All who desire the national and social liberation of the Filipino people can appreciate the book as revolutionary testimony and as literary work.

PROF. JOSE MARIA SISON
UTRECHT, THE NETHERLANDS
SEPTEMBER 4, 2018

Introduction

In May 1980, when I fell in love with the mountains and tried to reach the heights, I thought I would write about my experiences as a woman revolutionary. It was the auspicious beginning of a life that had all the ingredients of a great narrative. I thought I would even write the history of our struggle as experienced in the Mindanao mountains. But the war itself has a way of getting into the stories where time, space and sentiments do not permit us to put on paper what is happening on the ground. As our teacher once said “so many tasks cry out to be done,” and I had barely written the first few lines of my journal when another task would take over.

It was my most esteemed friend Teodora whose life away from the Philippines and whose questioning urged me to write. They were just

simple letters, some of them scribbled on the edges of magazines and wrapping papers that, through the span of 38 years, piled up in her box of remembrances. That she should save my letters for almost four decades was a mirror of the steadfast dedication we had for the struggle and for our friendship. One day she trudged through the mountains and brought me this box and said, “here, Kasama, will you take your pick and share your stories?”

And so we have this compendium on warriors, poets, and friends. It is a very incomplete and inadequate volume and clearly does not do justice to the greatness of the people I’ve met, the peasant masses who opened their doors to us, the comrades and Red warriors whose singular dedication and courage define our hope for the future. I would have wanted to include so many more, those who have helped me see clearly the vision, endure guerilla life and find joy in my profession, but I am limited by the exigencies of other more urgent concerns under a vicious climate of increasing state violence.

On the 50th year of the CPP’s establishment, I take this privilege of sharing with you some of my poems and stories, by way of tribute and gratitude to the beautiful, collective life inside the people’s war. I hope this may also serve as a reminder and assurance to all comrades and to my dearest child that, no matter how difficult or

protracted, we shall push through to reach the commanding heights.

KA JOVEN OBRERO

Ancestral Lands



Ode to a Mountain

*Proud and cold,
At first you seem endless—
A jagged mountain trail
Of ups and downs
And myriad contradictions.
As we climb further up
Trying to reach the summit
Only to climb down again:
In a limitless confrontation
With water, earth, sky
Each vying for priority
As we discuss again the many
Problems cropping up
Of personnel and arms
Of mass base and mass movements
In this protracted marathon.*

*Ay, I know not where my limbs are,
But go I must, young comrades
Are waiting patiently and I try
To set aside this small discomfort.
I will not think of the sand in my boots
Nor the weight of my pack;
An old farmer passes by
A sack of corn on his head and barefoot
He must traverse these mountains
To reach the mill before dark...*

*Who am I to complain then
As I think of the front,
And its myriad contradictions—
Like these mountain trails
Crisscrossing but leading us
To the highest peak:
In a flash I see the plains, green and vast—
This must be the summit,
And a whole new world is before us!
But only in a flash... once again the fog
Somewhere there must be light,
Good weather, a plate of steaming rice
The masses waiting, the comrades ready
To unfurl the Red flag.*

Matigsalog

Is this cloud or fog? Whatever it is, I know we are always enveloped in this white and silent world that comes and goes as it pleases. Brrr, *ginaw*!

And I have never seen such imposing mountain slopes! To come here we had to walk for three days, three days along slippery river banks and stony creeks and cliffs so steep the world seemed to tilt every time I looked down.

Sometimes we would come to a place where the moss is a cold green velvet blanketing the forest floor and wild red flowers seem to sprout from rocks and trees.

At night we would camp in lonely solitary shacks left behind by the *hag-oteros* and wild abaca strips littering the ground as mute reminders of an existence in this remote wilderness. Or a deer would make a plaintive call, trying to make contact with the rest of this silent world.

In the morning, when the sun breaks through the mist we would be off again... Today we shall cross this mountain!

And we start climbing. Up, up, up into the sky! The foliage here is thick. There is just a small path deep into the forest then into a clearing, then down again into a river. Wow. Everything here is rock. Big, big boulders shaped by centuries and timeless seasons. At the bottom is another river,

like a white, foaming serpent weaving in and out in the foliage. My head reels.

Thrilled and frightened, I concentrate on my steps, each movement a sure and balanced certainty else I slip into the ravine. I watch my comrades climbing simply with nary a care in the world, their quick, sturdy legs passing through my eyesight as I try to crawl my way up.

"Here, Kas, let me take your pack." I hand him my luggage gingerly. A brown arm holds my hand, ever so firm and steady.

"Here," he says, "step on my foot because these stones are slippery."

I put my foot on his, handing him my trust. He feels like solid rock underneath.

"Oops that was great!" he smiles at me in encouragement; and we continue to walk. This comrade looks so strong and invincible, his legs are like quiet tree trunks. He is part and parcel of this mountain, I think, the moving counterpart of the rocks and roots of ancient trees.

Climb, climb, climb. When will this climbing ever stop? When will this trail ever end? Already I could sense the asthma coming, short, gasping breaths like a stray cat in my throat. Please don't come yet you cat, before we get to our destination. I negotiate with myself as rivulets of sweat pour into my shirt, my pants. Argh! What labor!

For the people, for the people, I whisper to myself, but I need to rest! As if my breast will break.

The comrades stop walking. They are all sitting down, waiting for me. Now this must be the top! I stop and sit. *Salamat, Santisima!* I say silently to the gods above, this must be the top.

We are on top! I sit down on a log and slowly unlace my shoes. Aha! I knew it. Two fat black leeches are resting between my toes and there is another on my instep.

"*Kas* please take them away!" I implore the comrades urgently who smile and carefully remove the offending parasites. Then they start teasing me.

"Aha. Afraid of leeches! But not afraid of the enemy!" I smile back, a little strength trickling into my bones. Irreverent jokes do make me feel stronger. And we have come to our destination. I stand up and say "Go, let us go! Race you to the community!" And they all laugh at me and we gather our things and start walking towards the clump of houses on the mountaintop.

The village itself is a kind of rugged beauty—a great remote place laid to waste by the vanishing forest. The forest has been destroyed by the lowland big loggers. The only trees left here are those located on the steepest ridges which no man or machine can touch.

The Matigsalog, like the Umayamnon, Dibabawon, Higaonon, Bagobo, Klata, Tagakaolo, Subanen, Dulangan, Teduray and other indigenous peoples of Mindanao are very margin-

alized. They subsist on *kamote* and a sprinkling of upland rice. Their children are malnourished, they barely eat three square meals a day. There is no school, no clinic, no definite roads, no teachers, priests or sisters. There is no market, chapel or *purok*. It is the most neglected place I've seen in my entire life.

A woman about my age comes to greet us. Brown eyes twinkling, she approaches me and bows slightly. I smile back, there is instant rapport between us. Then she goes to the center of the hut, opens a pot and takes out a plate of *camote*, offers it to us, (I would learn later, this was supposed to be their meal for the day.)

She touches my hand, touches my pack, touches my heart. It is the most meaningful nonverbal welcome and it makes me extremely happy. On my part, I break into equal parts our remaining *baon* of fish and rice, for everyone to eat. And suddenly, everything seems like a feast.

Thus began my life with the Matigsalog, a life that I would share for the rest of my days as a (happy) revolutionary.

Umayamnon

Mariyow masulom kaniyo dumako! This means “good day to you comrades” among the Umayamnon of Agusan. Umayamnon is a Manobo sub-tribe who live along Umayam river in the remote boundaries of Agusan Sur and Davao.

We have been here for more than a month now and I have begun to learn a few short greetings like “*paragas ki!*” (may we pass your way) and “*mabugkhat*” (that’s heavy!) to the women we meet on the mountain trails who carry on their heads sacks of shelled corn. Their load must weigh about 30 to 40 kilos, yet they look so effortless and graceful.

Nowhere have I seen such physically strong women as the Umayamnon. Here they work in the fields, carry heavy loads, tend the children, cook, and even build a house! Often we would meet them carrying a *liang* of *camote* or corn on their backs, an infant dangling on their breast while the husband walks leisurely behind with nothing but a *bangkaw* (spear)—a wooden weapon with a blade on one end, (probably handed down from an earlier generation) as protection from possible attack.

Elsewhere, they no longer carry spears but *garand* and armalite rifles—much valued family treasures which are symbols of the capacity to defend against an enemy.

Rifles are also kept in preparation for *pan-gayaw*—a tribal custom where an individual or a family takes up arms in retaliation for a “wrong” done. Wrong can range from simple acts of indiscretion to non-payment of debts to love triangles. *Pangayaw* is indiscriminate and anybody passing through (including children and women, dogs and fowls) may be killed. The most innocent are easy prey and many have lost their lives this way. *Pangayaw* seems to be a continuing practice of the tribes here (and I understand not only of the Umayamnon but of practically all the indigenous peoples in Mindanao).

Part of our education is to let them see the implications of *pangayaw*. The question is: who is your friend and who is your enemy? And even more importantly, who is your true friend and your real enemy? Appearances can be so deceiving.

To go back to the women, the unsung heroes of the tribes... Here, I marvel at their strength and perseverance in a world which seems to oppress them at every turn. In marriage they have no choice but to follow their parents' wishes. At the tender age of eight, or nine, they are made to live with the would-be-groom who may be of their age or older sometimes old enough to be their father, provided that the man's family can afford a dowry of horses, goats, rifles, *agongs*, or even cash. To refuse is unthinkable and may cause a *pangayaw*.

Every bride must be a virgin, woe to her who is not. After the marriage she becomes the work-horse of the household and is in charge of planting, weeding, harvesting and other jobs in the field; not to mention taking care of the children. No wonder the wives prefer to have their husbands take a *duway* (a second or third wife) who will have to share work in the fields and in the house.

Is ignorance bliss? Perhaps. That the women do not understand that they are oppressed. That no discontent is felt among them. No struggle. To continue with their customs and traditions as they have done for years. Besides, who are we to judge and interpret their silence? But is it right?

Is it not our duty to make them recognize and understand their rights as human beings?

More on the Umayamnon

Nowhere have I seen such poor, neglected people. In each village and in every house we visited at least one person was lying down, sick. All the children I've met (and I mean ALL) are malnourished. In varying degrees. Food consists of *kamote* or *kasilo*, nothing else. *Kasilo* for breakfast, lunch and supper. No vegetables nor fruits, not even root crops.

For too long they have depended on the forest for their subsistence. But now that the forest is gone, they are truly bereft. No more wild boars to hunt. No honey to gather. All the big trees have been taken by the big loggers. Consunji, Elizalde, Alcantara, Sarmiento, Valderrama, Antonino, Buencamino, Enrile, PICOP, Roa, Magsaysay. The forest is gone. The trees are gone. The mountains and the lands are eroded.

But the loggers, they are insatiable. So they started a "reforestation program" that ostensibly would bring the forest back. But it is a monocrop plantation of industrial trees; fast-growing softwood varieties. After 5 to 7 years the *falcatas* and *gmelinas* would be ready for harvest; and the loggers smile at this good fortune. Is this really reforestation? The government program called CBFM (community-based forest management) and IFMA (integrated forest management agreement) are nothing but devious disguises for logging.

The company guard, a burly man who talks Manobo with a slurred accent carries an M14 rifle; unsheathes the company's master plan like a misplaced sales man and says "1000 hectares per barrio for the tribe's crops, the rest of the land for the tree plantation." In exchange for this he promises money, Tanduay (liquor), tobacco, sardines, eyeglasses, toilet bowls, etc. "You need not work anymore," he says, pulling his wallet to demonstrate the company's wealth.

The *datu* simply smiles and nods and does not utter a word of protest. But I saw some furtive glances among his men. Perhaps there is a sign I have failed to notice. They are not as simple or naïve as I thought they were. I've heard about the fierce dedication to their ancestral lands and the passion to defend their rights. If the company guard knew better, he would do well to remain in his barracks. There is a seething volcano here that may soon erupt.

And so we live here, trying to learn their language, their ways of thinking and doing, their system of production, their political organization, the loyalties that bind the *bagani* to the clan, their social justice, their concept of right and wrong, friend and foe, struggle and unity. And their history! Here is an entire chapter of Philippine history that still needs to be written. It is a whole new world, strange and difficult and a big test to our revolutionary spirit.

In my smattering Manobo and with the friendliest smile I try to tell them about production and food. I talk to the women, especially the young mothers who carry their young with a piece of cloth tied to their breast. I try to tell them of the need to plant more grains and vegetables so there will be food to eat; and what a good diet of vegetables can do to our body.

I gather all the edible greens available: *pako*, wild gabi leaves, *apusaw* flowers, cassava leaves, bamboo shoots—boil and eat them with a dash of salt. But they seem not to understand. Their fingers point to the *bulad* (dried fish). Then they ask if it is possible to eat the bamboo shoots. Yes, yes I say, this is good. I think of the food back home so rich and milky compared to the diet here. To them the best food is still sardines or dried fish (we have heard of tracts of ancestral land having been “exchanged” for a box of sardines and tobacco). Of course the loggers do not understand. To the Manobo, land can neither be sold nor bought.

I can see that only the fittest survive here. The weak die naturally. They are killed or eliminated by nature, by poverty, by the sheer hostility of the mountains bereft of its lifeblood, the forest.

The stark simplicity of our comrades who have remained here is a shining example for all of us. Could I do as they have done? I don’t know. I don’t know if I can stand the sacrifice. My most noble

ideals tell me to stay here, to survive and help the people fight against the logging company, against oppression, against ignorance! This is a lifelong vocation. "Like an ox I serve the children."

But I am happy that we have comrades working with the *Lumad*, in utter simplicity and patience, touching the lives of the tribal communities—in a way that does not destroy their essence as the last remaining stronghold of Mindanao's national minorities. I know we still have a whole world to discover and to understand.

B'laan

Conflagration in the mines! People, the Blaans are being eased out to give way to large-scale mining owned by Xstrata (a British-Australian multinational). Here the miners plan to extract some 2.2 billion tons of copper and gold—from the biggest deposit in Asia and probably in the world. The Aquino government with some of the wealthiest Filipinos are sponsoring this heinous plunder of our resources. To paraphrase Marx, “all that is solid melts into air... and we are compelled to face our real conditions of life.”

Xstrata-SMI's big mining will contaminate five major river systems. It will destroy mountains and rice fields.

Hundreds of thousands of people will lose their livelihood. The farmers, fishers, tribal communities who populate four provinces of south central Mindanao will be adversely affected. These are the agricultural provinces of South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Davao del Sur and Sarangani.

Resistance is written in the mountains and the Blaans and peasants who live in these communities are honing their spears and machetes.

We are in the midst of these and we need all the help we can get. This plunder must be stopped. This bloodbath must never happen. The people, the Blaans will be at the losing end when the mines turn their mountains into dust. We must

help the people drive away these foreign devils
from our land. We must!

War Song

*Death is a thousand stealthy feet
In the bowels of Bulol Lumot:
The sharpened batik with fangs of death,
The suyak underneath the lethal leaves.
Let the enemy take our land
As they have done for years.
Let them take the trees, the gold
The rivers and the burial grounds.
Let them take our children's schools,
And everything that we have built.
Now we must see the better warrior:
Their goons or our bagani
Their laws or our tradition
Death will judge the vanquished
The mighty hand of justice pushes us
Magbabaya's anger will not be quenched
It flows into our veins and
will not give us rest—
This quiet wrath is the arrow's end
About to strike, death hangs in the air
Death is everywhere,
Death hangs in the air
Death is everywhere.*

—interpretation of a Lumad *oranda*

Why the Mountains?



A letter to Rosa & Simone:

When your mother mentioned that Rosa wanted to be a journalist, I was glad. At last, I thought, there's one in the family who would appreciate the printed word as much as I do; and would bring my secret dreams to fulfillment.

My work in the countryside, and my itinerant life makes it difficult for me to write. If only I had time and the patience to record events here, to make a journal of our mountain life, what a great book it would be, a compendium of the revolution. To paraphrase a Latin American writer, third world writers need not write fiction; all they have to do is record events as they happened, and write with honesty because life in these parts of the world is so rich, and so mysterious there is no need to invent a story at all. I agree with him.

Sayang you didn't come with your mother then. It would have been a great time for rediscovering our roots. I could have shown you the many landmarks of our fascinating childhood and why your mother rages so. You see, she was brought up at a time when our family was just beginning to understand our class identity as peasants, the bitter taste of poverty and oppression in a small town obsessed with status. In church, we couldn't occupy the front pews. Those seats were donated by the rich and only the rich families were entitled to seat there, near the altar, nearer god. Even

our grades in school were earned with a vengeance as honors were vested more easily on the children of the rich.

Nanay, your *lola*, embellished this phenomenon with stories that illustrated in painstaking detail the gaps that separated us from our well-off relatives.

Of course it was easiest for me. I emerged at a time when being poor was honorable when combined with talent. I was in grade 1 when they pinned your mother's valedictorian medal. She was the firstborn, and so it was expected all the siblings would follow suit. I was four years old when Nanay would send me to listen and later explain the *bandillos* of the *baryo kapitan*. When I couldn't explain, she scolded me. In the most practical ways, our mother taught us to be present and smart. Riding the bus, she would censure me for sleeping. "See everything there is to see outside. And besides, we paid for the fare and you will just sleep?"

But while my elder sisters and brothers weeded the rice fields or sold tomatoes at the marketplace, I stayed home and pored through pages and pages of the encyclopedia, the history of the world by H. G. Wells, books on nursing, and various fairy tales from the public library. In the evenings I read until mother would turn off the lights, afraid I might turn mad like our rela-

tive who spoke Latin verses on top of the carabao in the blinding rain.

I read a lot then but did not fully understand many things, including my mother's singular vision for her children: to study and get a college degree, the symbol of our deliverance from poverty, and from our rich cousins who scorned us. Independence and responsibility were practiced without fanfare. It was her belief that hard work and a spartan life would help us focus on our studies.

"Here is 15 pesos," mother would tell me on a Monday, "do what you can do with it." Thus, at a very early age I learned to budget the meager weekly allowance. What she didn't know, I seldom bought food or viand so I could afford to watch the new movies showing in town. Five centavos worth of *Choc Nut* then was all I would eat with a plate of steaming rice. It was indeed a very spartan life but for me, it was the good life.

In 1974 after graduation from college, I went to work with the government doing research. Once we were sent to study the migration patterns of fisher folks who migrated to Mindoro island, where, on the shores of Lake Naujan they had formed a small thriving community. This lake was a veritable treasure trove where one could find the most exotic fishes in the world: giant eels that looked like tree trunks, catfish and mudfish and many other fishes that swarmed the shallow

shores. The fishermen could have lived a life of plenty here, were it not for government regulations that forbid them to fish. "Because Naujan Lake has been declared as a National Park," the Bureau of Fisheries guy told us, lamenting, "but there are complications," he added.

And later I saw why. There, right there at the mouth of the lake was a big fish pen. It was said the First Lady and the natural resources minister owned this fish pen. They were exporting fish to Hongkong and Japan from the bountiful catch of the national park. So that was what the study meant: millions for the rich, misery for the poor.

I didn't know the particular moment when it happened. Perhaps it was when the fishers were telling us how they killed the guard in anger, but in a flash I understood many things. I understood my mother's singular obsession to stand up and fight for the things that matter. I remembered exactly how my father's feet looked eroded and torn from too much exposure to the rice fields. I saw my siblings working hard, and the code of discipline that bound us. I understood that in life one was either rich or poor. The rich can have the fish, the poor will have to fight to get the fish. Then I felt a great kinship with the fishermen of Naujan Lake and vowed that someday, justice will have to be served.

So now you have an idea why I chose to be here. The mountains have a way of welcoming their

children to fulfill their deepest dreams. It is a hard life I lead, with many obstacles and a harsh, tortuous path but all the more fulfilling. And despite the fine words I carry, the smooth accent, my roots are here, among the farmers and the workers whose simple courage and rough ways make them one with the earth and with our origins.

But March ended too quickly, it was our last day home.

Suddenly a sad, unknowing fear gripped me. I had a fear of flying, fear of the airport, fear of meeting people from the outside world, fear of death and prison, fear of the world. I felt as though life began and ended here in this street, in this house where every nook and cranny had a story to tell. It was my womb, my beginning, my childhood, and at that particular moment I had a strange urge to stay and be protected from whatever danger lay ahead.

When the morrow came we took the jeep and said goodbye. Goodbye to the small huts, the grubby children of the neighborhood whose friendly smiles and dear familiar faces hugged my heart. I loved them very much.

Elisa's eternal presence on the chair by the porch enveloped in dust and memories said it all for me. "Goodbye dear child, take care." She said with her eyes, without saying a word.

Then we went to bid *Tatay* goodbye. He was far off in the fields and Juanito waved and *Tatay*

was running towards us—a strong man of the fields. It was his hands and feet I noticed, so brown and gnarled, like roots of ancient trees. A great loneliness gripped my breast. In a flash I saw something: an understanding, a truth about my existence—my father is a great proletarian, always running and ready to serve others.

Too soon we had to go away from ourselves to enter the mundane, the battle of daily life. At the airport I did not have the chance to bid your mother goodbye. We were like stilted figurines, lifting bags, getting tickets, checking if eyes were on us. For it had been so ordered that we must not show emotion, kinship and warmth. I felt sad. As though I was leaving my soul behind... Once more I must fend for myself, get a feel of the surroundings, detect if I was being followed or not. It was the end of my vacation.

And then I was raring to go back to my mountains. I wanted to go back and be a part once more of the green and unending hills: to work, to make myself useful, to live as my family so ordered in excellence and service. I wanted to be a worthy daughter of that old farmer who had no thoughts for himself but to coax the fields to grow and ripen so the children could trod the path of a better life. I wanted to be strong as my mother had been strong with the strength of her convictions. I wanted to be like my sisters and brothers who were all fulfilled and happy in their chosen fields.

And then I wanted to be myself—a revolutionary and humanist, a warrior and lover.

Rosa & Simone, I have been verbose. I just wanted to recapture our wonderful vacation and introduce you to the family. And why I chose the mountains. Another time it will be different. Maybe even better. Be sure to come with your mother...

Letter to a Political Detainee

While I write you here outside of prison, my thoughts are constantly with you. I still join you in all your fears, anguish and thirst for justice. How long will this waiting be for justice and freedom to be won?

The struggle of political detainees is a struggle for justice. The cause for our detention is a mighty cause. We are jailed because we are critical of the existing order. We want to change things for the better and follow the path of righteousness. We are not afraid of the powers that be no matter how strong and powerful they are. Our weapon is our principle. We have had known leaders in our country and the world like Sison, Diokno, Mandela, and many others who were imprisoned because they have made their stand contrary to those who would want to preserve the status quo. They were voices crying in the wilderness but in the end their voices reached the four corners of the world proclaiming justice and freedom.

“Never Give In”

When Juanito was still alive he would tell of his experience and the terrible ordeal he had in the hands of the military and police. Most of the time he told his stories in a very funny way so that instead of feeling sad for him, we would just laugh.

But there were moments when he would tell of his experience, the torture and the great resolve that sustained him in those long hours behind iron bars. He would tell me: “Never ever give in; pain is only in the mind.” He was in jail from 1972 to 1974. And then again for a few months in 1978.

Here is his story.

It was early morning around 5:00 when a group of armed men in plainclothes barged into their house. Juanito was in the backyard feeding his ducks and gathering ducks’ eggs. They immediately collared him saying “*putang ina, andito ka lang pala*” (son of a bitch, so you are here). Then they searched the house.

Immediately they dragged him to their car and sped away. Mother started crying. But knowing how, at that time, young men disappeared and never came back, she decided to search for him. Together with some neighbors, they went to the town’s police station. He wasn’t there. Then they went to the provincial army camp in the nearby city; and to every military camp in the neighboring towns.

Wherever she went, the military denied his presence. A week later, a policeman from our town took pity on us and told mother where Juanito was detained. Immediately, mother went to see him. Upon reaching the camp, the army men once again denied his presence, but mother insisted. She wouldn't leave until they produced him. For more than three hours she pleaded; and finally they got tired and they let her in.

What she saw made her cry. His eyes bulged from his sockets as though he had not slept for days. He had bruises on his chest and arms and had lost weight considerably. He was a terrible sight and complained of pain in his chest and stomach. He walked very slowly.

Very briefly he said he was tortured but could not fully say what he wanted to say because they were fully guarded and the guards could not allow for long sharing of the inmates with their visitors. It was only after several visits from my parents, when the jail was less strict that they had a chance to share what and how things happened while he was in the hands of his torturers.

"The first physical torture I got while we were at the provincial PC camp was a hard butt-stroke on my chest. It was so hard that I almost fell unconscious. This was followed by several blows on my stomach and back while they would ask me questions related to my involvement. They

wanted me to pinpoint comrades, organizational structures and u.g. houses. I denied everything.

“In the evening of the same day I was put in a dimly lighted room and once again several men started interrogating me, giving me hard blows every time. I did not answer them. They did not like this. Then they got a plastic bag loose enough for my head to fit in. I struggled but since I was handcuffed, I could not do anything. They tied the plastic bag around my neck so that no air could enter. After a few minutes I was gasping for breath. I felt like I was drowning. Then I felt lifeless, unconscious, lying on the cement floor. Later, as if I went to sleep, I only knew the plastic bag was no longer on my head and my torturers had left me. That night I was brought to my cell with the rest of the other prisoners.”

The second day was a busy day. They were made to clean toilets and rooms and so he thought that the first round of torture was the end of his ordeal.

But came the third day. He thought his torturers had already gotten tired and the tortures he got the first day was more than enough. But this was worst.

“It was morning of the third day when I was brought to another room with drums filled with water. There were 3 men in plain clothes. Then they started telling me that if I don’t cooperate I would drown in this drum. Immediately they

took a towel, dipped it in the drum and put it around my mouth and nose. They held my head facing the ceiling then they started pouring water in it until I felt my mouth and nose were full of water and my stomach too. They did this twice. Every time they felt I had enough water in my belly they would take off the towel and stump my stomach with their boots until water would ooze from my mouth and nose.”

“Not contented with such torture, they held my head and neck, then facing downward dipped it in the drum of water. I was struggling for breath but their hands were heavy on my head and neck. They did this 3 times. Every time there was a break, I felt my ears and head were full of water, my limbs were numb. I was vomiting, spouting water from my mouth and water oozing from my nose. This whole water torture I considered the worst ordeal... I thought I would die. I could take the blows but to drown in this drum of dirty water was terrible. It was a nightmare! But they did not get a single information from me.”

It was on the fourth day when mother saw him that somehow physical torture was diminished. This time he said it was more psychological. “The guards would tell us that eventually, all political prisoners would be thrown into the Culion Leper Colony to live a life with the lepers.” They would also tell him that the following day they would get his wife.

"I stayed in jail for more than a year and the days seemed eternal. We were always at the mercy of the jail authorities, all acting according to their whims and caprices. They always kept our door locked. There were days without the benefit of sunning and exercise and the food tasted like pigs' food. Several times I was placed in a *bartolina* [a very small cell, with no light, just enough for your body to lie down] because they found out I was leading the group to complain on our trampled rights."

After a year in jail without any charges filed against him and through the constant follow-up of my mother who never tired of visiting him and petitioning the authorities for his release, he was finally freed.

The following months after his release were very trying days not only for him but for his family. He was often sick, had difficulty sleeping and was paranoid about the military going after him. He often complained of certain "ringing in his ears" and felt that the water cure had destroyed his eardrums permanently. He would not go near a body of water because, as he said "it reminded him of dark things and he was afraid of drowning." He often complained of pains in the head and he was always taking pain relievers.

Nanay brought him to the doctor who found no trouble with his ears but who later advised him to see a psychologist or a psychiatrist so he

could tell everything that happened to him. As there was no psychiatrist at that time near our place, my mother tried to get our relative, a nun, to pray over him. She talked to him and prayed over him, but still to no avail.

It was through the help of our elder brother who talked to him patiently and partnered with him in a livelihood program that he started to get well; and slowly returned to his normal life.

But after about five years he was again arrested and jailed. Once again he was tortured, but this time it was more of the psychological kind. He underwent days and nights of interrogation and the military would not let him sleep nor rest. Night and day they pressured him to tell on his friends—where they were, who they were and what were their ranks in the movement. They did this with the barrel of a .45 cal. pistol pointed to his head. Or sometimes on the nape of his neck.

Of this event he would tell us: "Pain is only in the mind. When you condition yourself not to give in, no matter if they kill you, you will remain whole. In the end you know you've won and they have lost."

To my mind, my brother was a hero. He was the biggest living hero and I vowed that someday I would avenge him. I would fight his torturers and fight the system that perpetuates this cruelty among men, this wicked act against innocent civilians, and against my brother who was

kind and caring and responsible and whose only “crime” was to serve the poor and stand up for his principles.

Prison Wait

*And I think of an aging comrade
waiting in her small, dark cell
with only walls and a tiny window
nothing more*

*No sky nor sun nor earth
She waits for the trial that never ends,
witnesses that don't appear and
justice that's never served.*

*She waits each day,
for the hour to strike at nine
and the warden unlocks the door
for an hour in the sun.*

*She rushes to her little garden
her vegetables and flowers.
her cards and beads,
her illusionary forest.*

*Just an hour, nothing more
and back to the cell again
Flanked by guards and inmates,
Back to the long wait,
the minutes ticking into hours
the hours into centuries. Then.*

*She waits for the night,
the black cocoon
the smell of steel and sulfur
and puts to memory
every square inch of the building
the grounds, the gate, the watchtower.*

*She dreams of butterflies.
And every morning as she waits
for the guard to call the roll
She must remind herself
that waiting is also a task,
a duty
a commitment
a test of iron will
and in our war, a way of life.*

Questions

Is it wrong for me because my skin is dark?

Is it a sin because I am Lumad?

Is it wicked to have been born

where my father lived?

Is it a crime to fight for our ancestral lands?

Why call me a terrorist and a rebel,

If I fight for my nation and my people?

Mass Work



For Rosang, in the Forest

*The forest is the same
and it is different.
The rocks and trees are as they are –
solid, immobile
but when you look at them really close
they begin to move;
the branches shake their heads in
endless argument,
the leaves whisper,
they seem to have a life of their own.
Even the moss heave a collective sigh
when the mist comes on stealthy feet
to embrace them
with promises of sun and rain.*

*So too friendships, they are the same
and they are different
We quarrel and we haggle over some
mundane things
But remain faithful and steadfast
to our commitments.*

*The war embraces us like the mist and
Hides us from the enemy
Deep within the folds of the forest
We celebrate 38 years of togetherness & strife
Enriching us,
Constantly enhancing our vocabularies*

*Happiness is a swiftly moving verb,
it is more than a hundred firearms seized
success is a noun, an encrypted letter
duly sent amidst enemy operations and
Grief is a passive predicate, the festering
wound of a comrade left in the cold.*

*The war is a mist; it brings surprises—
Water is discovered in a continent of
rocks and trees,
and there is the goldgreen elegance of ferns,
like your translations.
But we hide our homesickness by
mending shirts and sewing sleeping bags
from fertilizer sacks to keep the comrades
warm at night.*

*Young and old are together in this war
like the mist which never misses anyone,
It molds and remolds us and
We grow wiser and gentler with the years –
We stop to listen to the others
We even sacrifice our pets for higher unities.
What a leap, what a difference
from our old selves!
The same and not the same
the mist, the trees, the moss, the ferns, the forest
our friendships, our commitments.*

Ambush

*As the slope waits for dawn to break
silence comes so still and cold
Even the leaves do not stir.
We wait for the enemy to pass
“in this specific spot,” the masses said,
We hold our breath; we wait for
the signal, our fingers ready
Our eyes on the road, all muscles in full attention,*

*Then
All waiting ends. Surprise is a
volley of gunfire. The fascists run for cover,
Two fall, the rest leave them behind,
They’re all cowards in the face of death.
We rush to take our harvest, 2 M14s
and a backpack filled with odds and ends
(no doubt stolen from many a peasant home
where they conducted their operations.)
The sun rises precisely at this moment
and we run to the forest and into
the waiting arms of the masses.*

Mass Work

*In mass work there is another kind of waiting.
We wait for the peasants to gather and build
their group,
We wait for them to speak, we listen long and
hard to what they have to say,
We wait for them to understand our call before
they'll make a move.*

*But as reason turns to fervor and
fervor into action,
We reap our gains painstakingly and
theory becomes material force.
Group by group, barrio by barrio
Guerilla front by guerilla front.
Our mass base grows.
In turn the masses wait for us
with the sweet fruits in season,
and to update us of what goes on in the barrio.
How the land contractors came
Who were for or against the lease.
We listen to each essential and
intimate detail. They wait for
our opinions and our suggestions
what to do, how to go about things.*

*But the enemy comes to destroy
what we have built
They kill and ravage, loot and burn*

*in a frenzy, to maintain their tyranny.
at times we can't do anything but wait
in the peripheries, quietly and in secret.*

*Only the masses know where we are,
They bring us food and information.
Very soon, and after many casualties,
the enemy subsides
to attend to other areas and many other areas
till they are stretched to breaking point.*

*Then we rebuild again, and again.
group by group, barrio by barrio
guerilla front by guerilla front
The masses will wait for us.
Patiently and without fail.
The masses will wait for us.*

*Waiting is indeed a discipline
a test of iron will
and in our war, a way of life.*

*The war is itself a forest, green and vast
it moves in many directions, it is a maze
where trails lead and mislead
to an even deeper maze
and where landmarks are erased
by wind, rain or neglect.
like lessons lost or forgotten or
like friendships and alliances laid to waste.*

*And are we halfway yet we ask the sky
These heavy clouds won't tell the time.
We plod on. We count the mountains
 we've traversed
the gullies and the rocks
(which all seemed impassable at first)
the bites of leeches on our feet
and the many deaths
of comrades and friends.
We dare not count the sadness and the grief
nor bring too much baggage. We move.*

*Is this now the middle-phase?
Some numbers are difficult to decipher:
companies and platoons
guerilla fronts and zones
thousands of Party units, Party cadres
warriors and rifles
and millions of organized masses.*

*Aren't we bigger, stronger now, we ask
If the enemy's desperation is a measure
Yes, yes, yes.
Though quality stems from quantity
We have to have a clearer gauge of where we are
For the war is also a forest
that must be conquered, day after day
built and rebuilt like friendships or alliances
which can't be left to nature or to fate.*

Ode To My Backpack

*Like the peasant who has tilled the land for ages
I knew not when I had you; or when you turned into the
faithful repository of my moveable life, my home
In the guerilla front. And you were always there
giving company, accepting everything with nary a word
of censure or regret. You just kept everything inside you:
letters half decoded, plans and programs,
battle reports, minutes of meetings and
reminders tucked into your manifold slings.
And of course my mundane needs:
malong, jacket, duyan,
shower tent, two shirts, two pairs of pants, some
underwear and my salbutamol inhaler. I always
tried to travel light but couldn't.
Sentiments burdened us and
we brought along sketches and photographs, books
of Neruda and Mao, or the black sand from Linamon
To remind us of our fears (the enemy lurks somewhere)
This slowed us a bit but you were
always uncomplaining
and mute, only the smell of our sweat and tears
Reminded us of what we've been through:
mountains, forests, plains, the smell of gunfire
and the clear, open faces of our peasant friends
They can't be here now to celebrate nor share our grief.
Will you still be here when i die?
Shall we reach the stalemate stage?*

*As usual you do not talk back, trying to look dignified
while the peasants invite us to their nipa huts,
for a meal of suman, luy-a, peanuts
We sit and talk, aged and young all at once,
with the promise of a bountiful harvest
In this our only true and happy home.*

*It would tell a tale of woe,
Of abandonment and loss.
It would tell us how
The men with cash and guns
Snatched her away from her
Ancestral home.*

*It would tell a tale of death
Of how they felled the trees
And turned her dry and bare
It would implore us
To rebuild her home
Of green and moss*

*It would tell a tale of ruin
Of how they dug into her body
To steal her gold and silver
It would implore us
To stop these men of foreign lands
from violating her*

*It would entreat us
To fight for her,
To live and care for her
As only a farmer would,
As only a worker would,
She'd want a breath of life
So she could bear the fruit
and produce the food
we need to live.*

First Child



Anak ng Bayan

You couldn't wait to come out and see the world. You opened your eyes and watched the waves of Ampinican chase each other. The peasant women came to cuddle you in their strong, warm hands. We had never felt so proud and fulfilled, your father and I.

We lived a moveable life, you and I. Wherever or whenever I was needed you were there with me. We learned to be fiercely dedicated to each other. You could sense if I was nearby; your tiny fingers opening and closing in anticipation.

"Anak ng Bayan" that's what you were, the people's little bundle of joy in the airy spaces of Tagoloan, Nasipit and Cagayan de Oro where we shared the same sky and listened to the happy legends of "how the frog came out of the deep, dark and well" or recalled with the most colorful details, the stories of *Lolo Amado*.

When you were four months old your father held you in his palm and you laughed, thrilled and frightened all at once. That would be the last you'd see of him.

Two months later, at dawn in Gubatan, the enemy snuffed the light out of him.

We were both so sad. But we had to go on living. Besides, we had things to do. A million things for the struggle.

In my dark days of grief, you were my reason for living.

Happiness is a smile on your face,

*Happiness is a smile on your face,
Love in your heart
Don't you see it's sad to be sad?
Dark nights have fireflies
Or a solitary moon planked
With silver stars ready to
Kiss the trees, the rocks
Child of my dreams why be sad?
Can't you see I have to be here
Part of this endless stream
And into this mighty river
Of ten thousand feet marching
And the people struggling, struggling.*

Tantrums

Your tantrums were the early signs of a temperamental spirit. Your friends in our street would try to humor you. But you could not, would not be assuaged with gentle words or sweet talk.

"Nanay, Nanay, don't leave me, don't leave me!" you cried at the top of your voice. Barring the door, and the gate and even the street with chairs and toys. I would stop in my tracks, impatient to go, afraid that I'd be late for the meeting but you would cry at the top of your lungs. A deep deep longing would fill me. I wish I were just an ordinary mother taking care of her son!

But always there were tasks to do in the zone, people to organize and to teach, bases to build.

"Nanay, Nanay," you would cry as if your heart would break.

Child, don't you understand this is all for you? Yes for you. My work, my tasks, the things I have to do up in the hills. They are part of a grand design for you and for all the children of this land.

As Eduardo Galeano says, "Everyone will have the right to dream, where the air will be free of human suffering. Where the world will no longer be at war with the poor, where no one will die of hunger because no one shall have indigestion, where the deserts of the world will be reforested, the desperate will be welcome and the lost will be found because they are the ones who despaired

from so much waiting and got lost from so much searching... But in this crazy and tough world, every night will be lived like it were the last, and every day it will be lived like it were the first.”

Lolo

His quiet, smiling face opened the day for us like the cool wind rushing to your face as you sped in your small *padyak*. There were candies and fruits and coins to punctuate our day, spoiling us to no end.

How we basked in his love, this great, simple man, whose calloused hands looked like the roots of ancient trees as he worked with the earth endlessly, coaxing things to grow.

He took care of us as he did his plants and crops; ever so faithful and devoted. He was never impatient, never wrathful. His quiet presence affirmed us; as we laughed and cried and nagged at the miseries of life.

With his *carabao* and cart he went to work on his farm; and in the afternoon would come home, his cart filled with firewood, coconuts and fruits. He gave of these freely to all the neighbors. The children loved him.

Lolo taught us to live with the people, to plant crops, to be busy with our hands and to be happy with our work.

Most importantly he taught us to be of service to others.

First child

The first open rift between my son and I happened on my wedding day. My second wedding that is. During the ceremony, when he was asked for his approval (as Party weddings are wont to recognize the role of immediate family members), he vigorously shook his head thrice then as an afterthought nodded twice. The masses and comrades were amused at this silent display of candor but I was quite disturbed. Clearly my son did not approve.

“Don’t you want your mother to be happy? She’s been a widow for thirteen years, don’t you think it’s high time? Besides, your new father is also a *kasama*... surely he’ll take care of you,” the comrades tried to reason out with him and persuade him to come out from his hiding place but he just kept his stony silence. This was the nth time that we tried to explain things, but he was obstinate in his refusal to even consider that I could contemplate such a move. That night, my collective offered to “baby sit” for me—as their wedding gift, but parental worry punctuated my new life as a married woman.

The truth is, I did understand how my son felt and I was equally disturbed that he should feel that way. But how to reassure him that nothing had changed, that our bond remained and will always remain—frankly I didn’t know how. This bond

was formed in more than thirteen years of shared guerilla life—from the harshest days in Butuan to the most traumatic situations in Zamboanga.

Once our post was raided by the enemy and if it were not for the daring intervention of our landlady, a peasant woman from the base area, we both would have either been killed or captured. He was two years old then.

We were also together on a trip when apprehended by enemy agents and the police who tried to bring us to jail. “*Nanay, nanay, kuyog lang kay basin patyon ka nila!*” (Nanay, go with them, they might kill you if you don’t). He was shouting and crying; he thought I would soon be salvaged. It was good I was able to negotiate my early release but for many years after that he would have bad dreams of cars and buses he always begged me to stay home every time I’d leave.

And there were many leave-takings—harsh, traumatic moments of going away, anxious hours of loneliness and guilt, extreme sadness and confusion that I should be so barred from my first, my only child. Why couldn’t I be an ordinary mother taking care of an ordinary child? On his part, he seemed more outspoken and violent with his needs as he barricaded doors and windows and threw tantrums that lasted until exhaustion and sleep overtook him.

This constant anxiety, coupled with the fear of death or capture by the enemy (especially

when security problems arose) forced me to find another home for him, far away from my work. In another island, with his grandparents and cousins I thought he'd be safe and well-cared for. I was obsessed with his safety. I didn't stop to think how a six-year-old would be able to cope with this separation, nor did it occur to me what possible effects the new environment would have on him.

Bereft and disoriented in this new outfit and far removed from his foster parents and the simple life in the barrio, he soon drifted away from me and from my guerilla life. He was a little boy lost in a sea of unknown treasures and privilege. Being the "poor neglected boy from the Mindanao highlands," he soon became the apple of his *lola's* eye, and could get almost anything he wanted.

With his older cousins he learned to be tough, to play the rules a thousand miles away from his home court. Little did I know this would play a most important part of his life and his character. "Take me back to Mindanao, take me away from here!" He implored me when he was ten and it was only then I understood how unhappy he was and how infinitely insensitive I had been.

But this was all before, when he was a little boy. Now he doesn't even notice when I arrive and when I leave. The computer seems to offer so much more inimitable entertainment and joy than the funny stories of the peasants and how

the pol-mil training went and who got malaria and how. It irritates me to no end when he prefers those rap American rock music to the revolutionary tapes I play. "Corny!" he'd say.

And he is mad when I ask him on small errands like washing the plates or keeping his beddings. He thinks of this as an imposition, an impingement on his freedom. Apparently he is confused as to what direction to take and I don't know just how to teach him. Here is what they call a generation gap between us. I don't know. I can't presume to say I know about mothering.

I look at all the 18-year-old comrades, the young dedicated medics in our base area and a deep longing fills me. I wish my son were here, among our young revolutionaries, discovering the wonder and fulfillment of being with the masses, enjoying the camaraderie and *joie de vivre* of the Red fighters, finding a life in the countryside. As I once did more than twenty years ago.

Or maybe this is too much or too soon to hope for. As my son tells me: "you're a control freak." Perhaps he is right. I can't help but hope though, and wait for the good signs.

Today he just made a sketch of a Red fighter on his way to the mountaintop. It is a powerful statement in pen and ink, the figure all muscle and anguish. And this is balm to my troubled spirit; like he understood my mountain life. If

only I can have him to spend summer in the base, my happiness would be complete. And maybe I could start all over again.

Couplets

*They say our lives begin to end
When we're silent on what matters*

*There are truths that can't be hidden
And realities that cry and wail*

*No cosmetic surgery
Can hide the scars of poverty*

*No, we can't be silent on the killings
No, we can't be silent on the lootings*

*There's a criminal in the palace
There's a murderer let loose*

*There's a monster out to swallow
Our lands, our grains our gold*

*My conscience will not give me rest
To live, to fight, and fight and fight*

*My heart is beating fast, so afraid, but
I must save this innocent Filipino child*

Dialectics



Learning

*Fog is here with us again
Stealthy shadow of the camp, grey
enemy flanking us from left
to right. Thus must we read
the temper of the skies:
No sunshine here but steady rain
and cold wind beating on our tents.
I try to burrow deeper in my cot
of fertilizer sacks. Still the cold winds
seep into my bones like some unknowing
error of the past, some wound,
some death that would not leave
till the most essential grief is learned.
Had you lived would you have understood?
I light the kerosene lamp and start to
read the darkened page. Words are blurred at first
as in the mist, but slowly take on meaning
to describe the mountain maze, our fragile lives
and this red red sun that's
hidden by the fog of our unbelief.
I move outside and watch
the light battling with the dark.
Rain now turns to drizzle
as fog lifts. There's comfort here
knowing tonight there may be stars
and tomorrow will be fair weather.*

A Letter From a Friend

I was so happy to receive your letter. It arrived just after our meeting and it was like a blessing after a storm. Thank you for your concern. I am ashamed for not telling you in the first place.

At that time I was so confused and sad. But he did try to reassure me and put my mind at ease. He and Ka Jules went to see me and their arguments helped me to understand a lot of things.

In my mind at least. My heart said differently. I have struggled with this for almost three decades and I thought I would bring this burden to my grave. Or work a gentle transformation from passion to what they call “class love” or “serving the people.” Until things came to a head. And I tried to resolve this by walking away. This was the best way, I thought. Walking away was the non-confrontational solution to things that we are so afraid of, like rejection.

In our collective, I did try to explain the reasons for my leave-taking, which meant baring my soul to everyone. Will they accept me? Or will they condemn me? I was so afraid. It was like shedding off layers and layers of conservatism, prudishness and mistrust against the opposite sex (I was the only female in the group and had nursed a deep bias of their feudal outlook.)

But what a dressing down I got! What censure! The person concerned tried to help me by openly

expressing three things: affection, attraction, pity. When he said pity, I cried. I don't want pity. Pity is for the weak and lowly! And then it was struggle all over again. We were back to square one. But maturity and wisdom won over emotion and desire. Ay, how difficult it is to be revolutionary!

All these were used to deepen succeeding discussions on sexuality, love and relationships. Our aim was to level off on what we deemed as our common understanding of a "proletarian relationship" amidst the exigencies of war, amidst so much loneliness and sacrifice away from hearth and home.

For myself, I felt that a level of understanding was achieved and I regained a modicum of self-confidence; enough to get me through the busy days at the front and put up a "fighting stance."

Of course there are nights when a thought would invade my mind like a serpent saying, "this sacrifice is too much for you to shoulder. Even if you are a Communist, or claim to be one, are you not a human being too? Don't you have your desires? Leave now or suffer forever." Daylight comes and I laugh everything off.

Yes, but I do suffer. While openly declaring that my feelings are non-inclusive, that I do not expect reciprocity, deep down is an ache. It is a deep wound I carry and I know he has the power to hurt me. I cry in secret, or near the well where the waters will disguise my tears.

"If and when it gets intolerable would you help me?" Alone I say this to the winds, praying that in time perhaps he will have more than just "affection, attraction and pity" for me.

The dog that's barking at the moon. That is how the comrades pull me back to earth and their easy banter makes me realize that they care a lot about me and admire my consistent effort to follow the rules on proletarian relationship. So it is back to earth; back to the mundane and the profound of guerilla life.

And I go about my work with renewed vigor and strength. Life is not about getting everything that we want. "Affection, attraction and pity" can translate to a lot of great things (I hope). Most importantly, it is coming to terms with oneself and confronting realities with patience and grace.

And I dare not think of your silence

*And I dare not think of your silence
Much less to speak of it
There is no space or time for words
Between us, there is no topic
Worth discussing. I glance at the sky
Soon it will rain again,
Endlessly, like tears.
Sad, angry tears on my roof
I spot a leak, I see grief
Oozing into my bed
No time now for sadness
In the household of this mountain
Soon the rain will stop
And tomorrow, sunshine.
Perhaps we can now discuss
What to do with the base.*

*And then I saw the wisdom of your face
in the gentle pattern of a fern
But dared not glance your way
Else I might see the anger there
Or worse, indifference
What should I do
Where should I go that
there be peace and harmony
between us?*

*Would I wait another 30 years
before we can see eye to eye
that strife may turn
to unity, to higher strife
and higher unity?
Is 30 years enough to rectify,
or turn indifference to friendship
or to love?*

Dialectics

*Everything is a process of becoming
Our ML books would tell us
As we grapple for their meanings
In our guerilla life and
In our ceaseless efforts to reach the summit
Marching firmly with our comrades
Singing songs of love and freedom
But the easterly wind blows and
A thousand leaves fall to the ground
Should we invoke the laws of dialectics
To explain his change of heart?
Everything is a process of dying
And coming to be
Our lessons say again, confounding me
Is the foolish old man dead?
Is constancy no longer a virtue here?
What is honest? What is fair?
But I shall stick to my contradictions
Longing for a love that will never be
Watching the moon rise to hide
The hurt in your eyes as it turns to wrath
And hopefully to love,
But the easterly wind blows again
And a thousand buds break out.*

In response to Fatima's outburst

written circa 1997

"But this suffering should also have its end now and not always in the future."

It was on my third month in a remote front, cut off from civilization by continuous heavy rains and a raging river and subsisting on nothing but wild root crops which our Mandaya friends gathered for us, as we taught literacy to the tribal children and tried to introduce better methods of planting, when it occurred to me to take a break. At exactly that moment pain erupted from my toes, my feet, my ankles and upwards to my head and I knew I was tired.

"Look at these base areas. After more than twenty years of painstaking work among the peasants and what has changed? Nothing! They seem to be poorer than ever after having been uprooted many times. And the political organization that we have built and rebuilt in these areas have been destroyed again and again by enemy operations. On top of this, the comrades have a rift."

I sigh with a deep, discontented sigh when you confront me with questions too difficult to answer because at times they are also my questions; creating doubts and sleepless nights.

But you are right, my lover, the reaffirmist (let's call him that) is a kind of "elitist." His words,

his stance, his way of handling contradictions, his dealings with his friends has been largely perceived as "elitist." They accuse him of being "intolerant of disagreement," who tells his erstwhile erring partners: "take it or leave it," "fewer but better" and his partners pack up and go, with nary a thought of what this rift will bring.

But were we not taught criticism and self-criticism? And what is the essence of the rift?

During the first months when the controversy erupted, my sympathies were with the rejectionist camp, the "injured party" who asked for nothing but a "free and democratic debate of the issues at hand." I listened to their arguments, but all that I heard were their complaints of my lover's "elitism, his arrogance, his rigidity and his downright foolishness."

But what are you proposing? I ask them and they cannot answer with one voice. This and that, they say without conviction. Obviously they are confused. They have no program, no platform, no real vision to speak of. They are just against one man and they are speaking in different languages. And once I heard one of them say "pera pera lang naman ito" ("just for the money").

I may agree with you, with your so-called "good intentions" but didn't Gorbachev also said he just wanted "reforms" when it was actually a final, ignominious downfall for the Soviet Union?

Why do you don yourselves in sheep's clothing when you are in for the kill?

What do the dissenters in the movement want? To do away with people's war. People's war they say "is obsolete and antiquated and what we need is an armed uprising in the cities and intensified warfare in the countryside." This is the so called "strategic counteroffensive" which, for about ten years (1982-1992) was declared as the correct line. And what did this entail? That to win our struggle we must radically step up our tactical offensives; maintaining big formations in the countryside and launching general strikes in the cities.

Boom, blagh bang! went the tactical offensives and the peasants ran for cover as helicopter gunships and bronco bombers attacked suspected base areas in retaliation. Villages became ghost villages and mass organizations evaporated into thin air. They forgot about empowering the farmers and building base areas. Yet they told us: "intensify guerilla warfare! Expand your companies and platoons! Build your battalions! Everyone is a soldier and every area is a war zone!" How the enemy loved this. They wanted to put us into a purely military situation; now was their chance to test the efficacy of their modern military equipment.

Ten years is too much. My friend, the guerilla commander who has been faithful and conscientious in the following the higher command's ori-

entation stands up and shows his left foot (a toe is missing); removes his shirt and shows a deep scar on his right shoulder; points at the wounds and bruises in his body and cries in anguish: "So many killed and wounded due to wrong orientation!"

Some of the national leaders of these ten erroneous years are now the dissenters, the rejectionists. How can they have the guts to go around, proclaiming their innocence, protesting the inhuman treatment that they suffered at the hands of the present leadership, when, they were the main actors of ten years error, an error which we dearly paid for with our lives.

For many years, these dissenters have flitted on the comfortable edges of the struggle, in the cities of their choices, writing from an ivory tower about lines and strategies. How could they err, when their method was supposedly "concrete analysis of concrete conditions?" Perhaps they did not know the conditions after all. They were divorced from the masses, from social practice. I guess they should be doing mass work in the base.

My lover is not an elitist. I believe he has an open mind and a compassionate heart to whoever wants to be part of this great and difficult undertaking.

And he is still the best lover that I or anyone can have. His program is whole and complete, his commitment is undiminished. It is what holds us together (including the young ones like myself).

Behind his polemics is the summed-up experience, the praxis of many years crystallized and simplified for everyone to understand and act upon. And only he has that courage to point out our mistakes—regardless of who may be hurt for as long as the errors are defined and rectified. Criticism is good. It cleanses us of our pride and helps us to remold. Didn't our great teacher say "if we have shortcomings we are not afraid to have them pointed out and criticized, because we serve the people."

Am I tired? I see a book (one of the books you gave me) and open it on a favorite page: It says: *"The people are the roots... and the people's force must be nurtured so as to strike deep roots."* It is by Ho Chi Minh, one of my favorite revolutionary poets. Was Uncle Ho ever tired?

No, I cannot be tired. So many things still need to be done, so little time to strike deeper roots!

Postscript to a Letter written just after the Reaff.

That was so much murky water under the bridge! We have moved on to confront other challenges. Most of the RJs have actually become our friends (except for a few who continue to enjoy the perks from Uncle Sam and are too proud to accept mistakes). Now it is 2018, and the masses have reaffirmed, again and again, the correctness of the NDR.

And they tried calling us “extortionist”

*And they tried calling us “extortionist”
But the taxpayers were just too willing to give
When they saw how the Red fighters worked
Not only in battle but all throughout the land
Planting and sowing seeds of food and hope
Dedicated peasant warriors of the people.*

*And they tried calling us “extortionist”
But the taxpayers were just too willing to give
When they listened to the children sing their abcs
When they watched our medics caring for the sick
When they saw how the community lived as one,
And fought for their lands and crops.*

*And they tried calling us “extortionist”
But the taxpayers were just too willing to give
When they saw how devoted and clean we are,
A total opposite of this land of thieves and robbers.
And when they felt the hope that springs from
the people’s war,
They help us, but silently, away from the evil eye
of the jealous dynast who wants to have it all*

Typhoons and Other Storms



“Criminal”

Teodora, your letter arrived just now. It was mistakenly sent to another front where enemy operation is in earnest. Everything in your letter seemed so far away; we have problems here.

My friend and comrade of long standing was captured three weeks ago. The enemy has tagged him as “the most wanted criminal” and filed 21 criminal cases against him. I shudder to think of him languishing in jail. The revolutionary chained to the steel bars. I put myself in his shoes and I fear for my own life. Why must revolutionaries suffer so? Is it not enough that we spend our days in the mountains, a thousand miles away from family and the comforts of home?

This comrade who was captured was supposed to serve as Louie Jalandoni’s bodyguard when he comes next month, and that was why he was on the national highway when it happened. I don’t know if the government would ever release him even if we invoke JASIG. He is a famous Red warrior on the island and most army officers know of him. He figured in so many tactical offensives, and the people speak so highly of him. Now the regime tags him as a criminal. And yesterday morning I heard over the radio that seven people under his command have surrendered. I immediately called the front to check if it was true. It was a hoax. An enemy propaganda designed to demoralize NPA

Red fighters. Haha. The enemy makes all kinds of intrigue. Ramos is a master at this.

Meanwhile, two calamities have struck. El Niño and the economic crisis. Every day here it is so hot and the mountains seem lost in the haze, the sunsets are so red and my lips are always parched. Aaay, I wonder how it is with the poor peasants. There are no more trees yonder and everything is like a desert. The peasants are deeply suffering. Some people died of food poisoning when they ate a certain wild root crop called *kayus*. Once we subsisted on this when we lived in the *Lumad* community. The *Lumads* know how to process this root crop to make it edible. Which takes a long time to prepare because it has to be placed in running water to wash away its toxin.

How does one explain to the simple folk about the drought? How the loggers have destroyed the forest and about greenhouse gases and why imperialism is the biggest culprit...

Everybody is hard up here. Not a thing to eat. No meriendas. No sweet drinks. Just the water from the spring. It is us who do not seem to be so affected because we have learned to live with it. No comfort or convenience for revolutionaries if we want to get things done: bases to be recovered, summings-up to be written, and getting to another front without any hitch. We can't afford to have another of our comrades captured or killed. We still have a million things to do, in this

long, winding road we call the people's war. Now,
go and "grasp with the bladed poem and let it sing
in your hands..."

Falciparum

It comes so sudden, and overwhelming I can only think of it as an ambush on a still summer day when the peace of the countryside is ripped apart by a staccato of gunfire and all that remains is the acrid smell of burned flesh and the sight of blood seeping on the ground.

At noon, when the sun is a white burning disk, a cold and wayward wind seems to invade the hut where I am preparing a simple dish of rice and gabi leaves. The chilling sensation invades my feet, my hands, then it spreads further inside, insinuating itself, stops in every joint, moves stealthily but irrevocably into my skeleton. My teeth chatter, my whole body shivers in pain and cold. A thousand needles made of ice seem to prick my bones. My head throbs, the cold is excruciating. "Cover me!" I cry, shivering.

The heat of the noonday sun is in my eyes but I seem to be freezing in my flesh, in the marrow of my bones. From a great distance I hear people's voices but they are moving about like ants, whimpering inside my head. "Cover me! Cover me!" again I cry out in despair. I want to be buried underneath, way beyond where the grim soldier cannot crack my bones with his torturing ice machine.

Then I feel a sharp shooting heat in my head. Very slowly, imperceptibly, everything seems to

be turning into heat. My eyes are now two sockets of boiling fever. I can see steam coming out of my ears. My throat is parched. "Water, cold water," I entreat. A glass is brought. I drink. "More! More!" they bring a pitcher. Still the heat in my throat and in my whole body would not be quenched. I feel like a desert. My blood is on fire. "Water, water," I keep crying in the blinding heat.

In the heat I see a kaleidoscope of images—wrinkled crocodiles perspiring in the sun with eyes like two red coals; mad dogs drooling with saliva; a cobra about to strike; the glint of steel; the enemy's evil eye; military boots caked with mud and blood. Stop! I cry. No sound comes out of my throat. The people around have turned to ants and they seem to be making signs, their mouths forming words only they could understand. So ants have tongues. I thought they only carried things and bowed to one another.. Now they can even talk, but they do not understand. Strange, I say to myself.

A white silver chopstick is pushed into my armpit and then I hear a murmur. Forty degrees, it says. Haha. Forty degrees is my grade? Haha. Soon it begins to rain. From my pores warm water trickles out. My back turns wet, then my clothes, then the bed. Water seems to be dripping everywhere. Endless rain is coming out of my insides. Only it is very hot and humid. I am in the hinterlands of Contra Costa and think of

the rain dripping on our tents for days, for weeks, not stopping even for a minute. It seems that the tear ducts of the sky has been ripped and all of heaven's sorrows pour on us.

Now I see widows and orphans who are forever searching for the missing limbs and dismembered heads of their loved ones. I think of Titan, the one whose head was carried by the men in boots in a fit of fascist greed. The prize! The prize! We all have prizes on our heads! I see a mountain of silver coins and beneath the heap is the face of Mandy. "Don't think of me this way, I'm family," she censures me. I agree. I am guilty. I am disgraced. I cannot even take care of my own family.

An overwhelming sadness and exhaustion invades my spirit. I see the misery of the mountains unmasked in all its barrenness. I see drooping huts ready to die; *Lumad* children with distended stomachs, staring with hunger; wrinkled women aged with worry and work; chieftains of ravaged villages; beaten *baganis* disarmed of their weapons; angry sons who would not be appeased; the indifference of friends; erstwhile comrades who have betrayed the cause; denuded hills full of dust and sorrow, deranged mosquitoes out to wreak vengeance on the human populace.

My life weighs on me like a great immovable log impinging on my feet, my arms, my body, my soul. I can neither move nor breathe. I am held immobile by a great evil force. "Help me! Free

Me!" I cry in fear but no sound comes from my throat. The ants turned people seem not to hear or care, they are busy bowing to each other in a senseless ritual while I struggle with the invisible force that holds me in its grip.

My fingers twitch. I can move! I am able to free my arms, and then my feet. I trash about, ready to fight.

I wake up drenched from my nightmare and sit slowly on the bamboo bed. I am amazed to find everything in its proper place. The hut, the tents, the trees, the rifles and the vests, backpacks neatly lined, and the comrades getting ready for a shift into another guerilla base. Everything is as it should be. The medics are even smiling.

"Your fever has gone, kasama. You'll soon be well."

I nod, too dazed and weak to speak. I stand very slowly and walk to the window. The stars have embroidered the heavens with a million lights. The night breeze is refreshingly cool. I feel utterly exhausted but at peace. I sense wondrous joy settling in my heart. Yesterday I have conquered my nightmares and vanquished the enemy. I know. In the velvet black of the night, the red-winged shining horse of the eastern wind shall always come to take away my illnesses.

(Falciparum or cerebral malaria is a disease which is spread through mosquito bites. I've had malaria since the 90s and live with it to this day. Most guerillas have this.)

Typhoon

Right now we are in the forest borderland of Bukidnon and Agusan Sur; quite a distance from the storm's pathway, but we have prepared just the same. We do not want another Pablo experience.

We have chosen this spot precisely because there are lesser trees and no indication of a landslide. And if the river just beside us rises, we can always go further up the hill. The typhoons here have become more intense, more destructive, more than anything I've known in our place. Nature rages and these puny mortals must hide to safety, away from her wrath. But we have barely rehabilitated our areas, and now another typhoon.

Since Typhoon Pablo wrecked a substantial portion of our communities, we have been busy putting back homes, crops, schoolhouses, repairing roads and planting trees. And the masses have risen to the occasion. Nobody complained. Nobody lost hope. Everybody went out to help with the reconstruction. Even the small children had their share of farm work in what little way they could. And our young, strong warriors have been here all the time working with and directing the masses. They have never been as heroic or as selfless as they are now.

Disasters have a way of uniting us, of bringing us together in grief and hope. The poor espe-

cially must come together to bring back their homes, their fields and their forests back to life.

The forests will take some time. So many trees uprooted and cut down by the wind. And I don't want to experience another storm in the forest.

And so we are on our way. This is but the second day of our 6-day trip in the dark mountains of Agusan. It's really a very strenuous job for me. My knees ache continuously. Downhill the pain is excruciating I want to cry out loud but everybody must be feeling the same. So I just drown my voice so that only I can hear. I try to be stoic here.

Comrades really are quite understanding though. They waited for me the whole time; assisting me through the most difficult paths, and through the slippery trunks of trees that we must traverse and the serpentine river we had to cross for what seemed a hundred times.

This must be one of the most difficult experiences I've had. Here we have very limited food supply, and cooking is allowed only at night (because of the smoke) I seem to be hungry most of the time and I miss the hot meals. And with all these strenuous activities, I must admit I am not as healthy as I used to be. As the war intensifies, I can imagine a more rigorous lifestyle awaits us; traversing mountains and rivers; going from one guerrilla base to another with as little food as we can. But right now, we must

cross this swirling, mad river... I must stop thinking about food.

And into safety! Warm hands, warm nipa huts, warm food await us. Aaaaah, it's good to be "home."

“Mad Dogs”

Thank you so much for the kindle. My problem now is that I couldn't even glance at the titles. But when the political weather turns calmer (ay, will it ever!) perhaps I will have the chance to read some of them.

Right now we are in the middle of a storm and the sad part is that I can't even come out of the resort to say hello to your mom. And I miss her very much and wish in the world I could be with her.

But to come out is to invite the risk of being bitten by the state's 'mad dogs' which roam around the city and at our gates. Things have gotten more difficult now that the administration is in a last ditch effort to win the war or at least give the impression that they are "winning the war."

At the heart of the resistance are the national minorities and the poor settler farmers of the rural areas (which also happen to be part of our base areas). For this, they are constantly vilified, castigated and militarized. Their communities are bombed, their leaders are killed or put behind bars over trumped-up charges. Evacuation centers have sprouted everywhere. There's one in Davao right now with about 500 people. There's another in Surigao with about 5,000-6000 people who have fled the enemy's airstrikes. The paramilitaries there have killed a prominent school administrator and two *Lumad* leaders.

Schools have been attacked and children and teachers have been threatened and harassed. The most recent victim was a Grade 3 pupil from Talaingod. He was gunned down near the school by Alamara paramilitary groups. The Alamara is a creation of Col. Eduardo del Rosario (a graduate of the CIA's "School of the Americas" who follows the prescription of using the *Lumad* as cannon fodder in the government's counterinsurgency program.) Children are victims. In this region alone, in less than a year, the most recent count of military atrocities against children has reached 29.

We are in the middle of all these. As you must know, we are looking into the foundational education of our children: What to teach, what values to focus on, and how to change an educational system that, for more than a century has been designed, controlled, and continually imposed by our colonizer, America.

And I am shocked to find again and again the colonial content of our textbooks. Imagine, Araling Panlipunan (the subject on Philippine history and culture) has been designed after the US National Social Science Council. Here you will find the most atrocious misrepresentation of Philippine history: "Aguinaldo (who sold the Philippines to the Americans) is a hero," or "American colonization civilized the pagan Filipinos and brought progress to the country." I

have found textbooks that deal with the Western way of life and these are being taught by the government's Department of Education even in the remote rural areas. Their newest regulation is the K12 system which aims to produce technical and vocational graduates for the plantations and factories of multinational companies.

Of course even I, and the rest of my siblings are a product of the American colonial educational system. That's why I write in English when I should be writing in Filipino. It is a sad state of affairs.

Kaya, ibig ko rin sanang matutong magsulat sa Filipino. Bumaybay ng mga salitang magpapahayag ng aking pag-unawa sa mga bagay-bagay; maging bihasa sa salitang kinagisnan, o di kaya'y maghabi ng mga tula at awit tungkol sa pinakamahahalagang pangyayari sa ating buhay. Hayaan mo, balang araw, di magtatagal, iiwanan ko na itong mga kataga ng mga kanluranin. Pero magiging magkaibigan pa rin tayo. Pramis.

[So, I would also like to learn to write in Filipino. Spell out words to express my understanding of things; become proficient in the language I grew up with, or perhaps weave poems and songs about the most important events in our lives. Let me, one day, soon, I will leave these western words behind. But we will still be friends. Promise.]—Ed.

Walk, Walk, Walk

Last month I thought it was the end of me. We were surrounded by so many “mad dogs” salivating to get at us. Our comrades had to smuggle me out of the small clump of trees that served as our concealment. We had to walk for eight and a half hours, from 7PM till the wee hours of the morning nonstop with only the light of a waning moon. When we arrived at the place, there was not a single resident. They had all evacuated to a safer place, away from the ire of the mad dogs.

So we had to find a local farmer who would guide me out. Then another 3-hour walk.

One of the peasants who gave us food was taken by the mad dogs about three days after we passed his farm.

I am now safe and sound. But about to go again. We are going to have a ten day summing up of our education work and I am excited. As long as there are no mad dogs, of course.

Now I fully understand the harshness of the terrain here. Miles and miles of cogon grass without a tree in sight. The logging company seems to have taken everything. But they say this is a mountain of copper and gold. Many mining companies are eyeing this area.

The mining company, an Australian-Swiss firm named Xstrata is going to mine this whole area—about 50,000 hectares of land located in

the tri-boundary of three provinces in south central Mindanao.

One of our mass leaders, the most consistent and most vocal anti-mining activist was gunned down last March. Other activists have been receiving death threats.

I am up to my neck with documentation work. So many things to write about, so much to do. Work in the rev will keep us from getting old.

With the farmers and the *Lumad*, we are fighting this company and we will fight it to the very end, until it leaves.

For Ariel
And five other comrades killed
In a landslide in December

I should have been with you, Ariel, when the mountains of Buribid chose to bury you in rocks and mud, a fitting death for our collective guilt. But the gods take only the innocent. And for us, this endless rain despairing and the nagging of the heavens to remind us constantly of our neglect.

Forgive my petty grief, dear friend; I should have listened to the trees when they begged for life and understood the birds' leave-taking against the violation of the forest. But we were too puny then, too few to go against those men who carried guns and owned the laws. And now this instant death, the avenging angel come to get his due, sparing no one, not even the cries of the innocent.

Is it too late now for elegies and tears? Shall we admit our errors and rectify our deeds? Come, gather the comrades and explain every excruciating detail of your death against the stampeding rocks and mud, the swollen river and the roaring madness of the mountain as it gave way, while your hands reached out for life!

Enough, enough now of this grief. Now we must woo the earth back to life and negotiate the heavens for forgiveness. And we shall hone our spears and teach our children so neither man nor beast can ever violate the forest once again.

Pablo

*Don't worry now of Pablo's rage
He's gone, and now it's time
To play the jigsaw game,
All the missing pieces we shall find:
Roofs of tin and plastic, floors and windows,
Bamboo, wood and picture frames
That spoke of younger days.
Everything will be accounted for,
Front reports and documents
What were lost, what could be repaired.
No bad wind nor enemy downs us.
We are like the fish
Whose cages were blown away;
Now they swim to freedom
From the lake to the big ocean,
To form a school, untrammelled and unafraid.
We learn from the fish:
No damage is too big
when man and nature renews itself
All the plants and trees uprooted,
But in time they'll be back
Just wait a few decades.
Life, like the rev, is a protracted birth
Of construction and reconstruction
Don't be impatient now
There will always be a time
and place for everything.*

Green Song of a Red Fighter

We must defend the forest

For our children and their children

We must defend the land

For those who got no voice

We must defend the waters

For the fishes and the birds

We must defend the air

For all the animals and trees

We must defend the poor

From the ravages of the rich

We must defend the earth

That we may live, that we may live

Elegies



gay comrades never die

for richard, wakin, purga, lipi, norie, & leslie

*gay comrades never die
they live in our minds forever
they are the silver lining
of our difficult protracted war
they make us laugh and sing
while serving the people wholeheartedly
their joy gives us courage and
our hearts are filled to the brim
ready to fight and win*

*all the laughter and the loving
are gathered in our hearts
comrades and friends, masses and allies
all are here to pay you tribute*

*each will have a story to tell
each will have a little gem of you
how you touched our lives
and we will never be the same again
you gave yourself to the mountains
and the mountains loved you in return
you were always there for us
serving the people wholeheartedly*

*hope rises in our breast
and courage springs anew
through you a thousand revolutionaries
live, and the masses will march to victory.*

Tribute for Ka Paking

*Farewell thee now
Great comrade, great friend.
Shall we meet again,
Somewhere in our guerilla base,
somewhere among our peasant activists
in the summit of our dreams
shall we meet again
to discuss which path to take and how
in the maze of people's war or
in the wide spaces of our alliances.
Death shall not bar you from us
Great comrade, great friend.
For the mountains and you are one
As the masses and their struggle are one
Moving us to higher ground, and higher still,
in the wellspring of your commitment.
"I only want to serve the people, nothing more"
you told us once so humbly it changed our lives
forever.*

*And the masses that you have served
ever so fine, so faithfully,
Can they forget their mountain spring,
Their source of strength and wisdom?
Will they not carry the imprint of your life
In the heartbeat of their struggle?
Will they not turn their tears to rage,
Their grief to revolutionary fervor?
Our guns burn with fury at the enemy, the fascists
now must face the people's wrath and
bear the brunt of young revolutionaries
Growing on your memory.
Each will take the path you've taken patient,
brave and true.
your death affirms the life we'll lead again and again
To serve the people to the last breath.
Look, a thousand, a million masses
Now are rising up, like you always said
There is no other way but the revolution.*

Hinundayan, Gubatan, Kampalili, & Other Peaks

*Was it like this in Hinundayan?
Did the fog gently touch the mountains in farewell?
Did the smell of alangilan fill the air?
Did the wind weep in sadness?
I stood on a slope and wondered how you fell.
Even Julio, our dear friend would not tell.
I heard they took your head,
It doesn't matter. Let the enemy have their silver,
It doesn't matter. Hadn't we known
it would be like this?
Had we not prepared ourselves for this?
I close my eyes, still there is this wound
that would not heal,
Grieve, grieve no more, comrade.*

*In another mountain called Gubatan
We sowed our name on the land until it bloomed
Ay, what laughter passed
Between us and the peasants
As we learned their tongue, their heart
Singing songs of love and freedom.
Do you remember how the fog danced when in
The morning we tiptoed from the hut to touch hands?
Your eyes went heavy with love
When you sang to sleep our child
Grieve, grieve no more, comrade.*

*In another age, another hill called Kampalili,
Where streams are clearer, peaks are higher
We walk along the mountain path,
Each wound, each grief is etched in memory.
The child has grown, a young man walks,
Sturdy and strong: how fast he climbs,
Putting away the mist and fog, higher
And higher still for the final hour.
As the enemy detachment sleeps below,
Awaiting death, the mountains soon
Will enclose them, surprise the demons in their lair
The final reckoning, the people's war.
Grieve, grieve no more, comrade.*

Ode to a Courier

*What strong sturdy feet
brought you running to this war?
You could have stayed put in your farm
with your carabaos and cows
or the four square walls of home.
But instead you chose to trek
the wide green spaces of our guerilla bases,
in this our endless marathon,
the people's war.*

*And you were our brown athlete
never stopping, ever on the move
bringing packages and letters
warriors and cadres
from one front to another
from one assignment to the next
outwitting enemy patrols and checkpoints—
you were always wiser, quicker
than all of them.*

*And as the war is a constant flux
so we moved
From the forests of Baganga and Cateel
where the rain never stops
to the valleys of Cotabato and Arakan
where it was hot and dry,
In convents, malls, cafes
or in the homes of allies who
hid us from the enemy.*

*We were together in a thousand
other places; only your strong sturdy feet
showed the signs of our peripatetic life
But your element was in the mountains
where you were always ready to run
for the next task, the next journey
despite the risks, for the enemy lurked everywhere.*

*Light of limb and disposition you zoomed
into our lives as each day we waited for your arrival.
And like the wind you'd be in camp
laden with surprises. Then as we drank
our coffee you'd tell us what you saw and heard.
Full of laughter and good humor you
said good night to all of us,
never knowing it would be your last.
And then you were gone.
All too suddenly the mountain trails were empty
the roads stretched away to nothingness
and there was not a trace of your strong sturdy feet.
Only the wind was weeping for its lost twin brother.*

*Yet, now I see you everywhere,
a thousand couriers have taken your place
sturdy feet traversing hills and dales,
dodging checkpoints, daring the drones, the bombs
wiser and stronger than their father,
intimate with the wind and waters
full of laughter and good humor
as they go about their tasks.
I see the sun rising in their eyes.
I sense the moonbeams in their smiles
I read the message of struggle and hope
In every drop of sweat and blood.*

Elegy for Ka Louise

*There was pure joy in your eyes
When you showed us her picture—
“Maria Caril Tres after Front Seventy Tres”
You proudly said, overwhelmed with love
Your curls were as ferns laughing in the wind
Your brown face gleaming with promise
The promise of a new base, a new front
Where the masses shall converge
To fulfill their long lost dreams,
Free from the bondage of soil and want
Free from the grasping hands of robbers
In this fractured land of gold and silver*

*And there was fire in your veins when you talked
Of this new front, this new child of infinite promises,
A Red orchid growing out of the veins and rocks of
The old Daguma mountain range. There was love—
There was so much love you sowed with the peasants
Who found hope and laughter in the new-born.
Clear eyed and resolute
You went back to the mountains
Where the masses and comrades awaited you
And you kissed Maria Caril Tres goodbye
With the milk oozing from your breast
That would soon become a river of fire.*

*Now these mountains are stained with red
Redder than rubies, harder than diamonds,
More precious than any jewel
Yours will be the hottest blaze that will scorch
the earth
And the brightest light that will guide us
through the maze
In this fractured land of gold and silver,
You will be our sustenance, our strength
That will nurture us through the years.*

*As for Maria Caril Tres
I hear her cries now, lamenting your absence.
A thousand mothers rush to her side—
Peasants and workers and students,
All the masses that you have touched
They will all be there to nourish this child
So she'll grow up and a thousand others
Like green ferns laughing in the sun
The hope of everyone, the brightest gem
Sowing the seeds of love and service.
In them the masses shall converge
To fulfill their long lost dreams,
Free from the bondage of soil and want
Free from the chains of a rusting order
To turn this river of fire into an ocean of life.*

For Lablab

*At night we hear the wind weeping
And a little voice is calling
Don't leave me, please don't leave me.*

*Ka Lablab would you forgive us?
We didn't know, we didn't understand
We didn't try hard enough*

*You braved the bullets
You braved the wounds
You braved the hunger and the cold
But we weren't there when you needed us
We weren't there when you needed us.*

*Ka Lablab would you forgive us?
Would you forgive our weakness?
Would you forgive our cowardice?
Would you forgive or ignorance?
Would you forgive our lack of vigilance?*

My Father's Hands



Ode to My Father's Hands

*Rough, gnarled as a coconut trunk
These are my father's hands
And I remember them so clearly
They are imbedded in my memory
And in my veins that urge me to work
In these mountains where, every day,
Every hour is a season of growth
And people and things are in a constant
process of becoming, as seeds take root
"Quick, take the lever now
And load these trunks of wood
Onto the cart," he'd say, so easily
Did Physics come to Buenavista
As I struggled with my Math
So he struggled with his hands
Ax, wood, earth—they seemed like one
Indivisible and consistent as a heartbeat
Graceful as the fields of yellow and green*

*Silent and proud, this man,
He had no words to say at all,
He was busy with his hands
It was his hands that spoke
Of the world, and of the texture
Of things: soil, plants, trees,
Coconuts and fruits, and funny,
A cow sleeping soundly
Under a mosquito net, his devotion
Extending unto the most mundane.
I will always remember my father's hands
It is the best and most important gift
It has taught me to be happy
And to love my work.*

A Day in the Life

Again we went to market today. Going to market with Fatima is an event in itself. First you take the *padyak* (be sure to pay only 5 pesos, Fatima would say) for a three-minute ride to the market. Then you go into a short but very busy strip of everything where the market takes you in: vegetables and fruits, tomatoes and spices, ready-made food, fish, meat, poultry, ukay-ukay, children of all ages, men and women, familiar and unfamiliar faces—the heartbeat of this old feudal town lives here. And Fatima likes to go around the entire range of the market, find the best and cheapest products being sold here and to feel that she is still one with the vendors in a life she had shared a long time ago when Nanay used to sell tomatoes and we were very poor.

Are we really as poor as Kapu? Were we ever like this? She would ask me, pointing to the grubby children, the dirty canal that's always full of plastic wrappers from junk food and candies, ducks and chicken shit everywhere. "I feel that we have not done anything at all. It's still the same." Worry lines appear on her face. "I can't live here," she says.

I can almost understand her predicament. Having lived in Europe the greater part of her adult life, and traveled the world so many times, she has adapted into the comfort and conve-

nience of the first world. But for her children and grandchildren whom she loves dearly and have their own stories to tell, her life in Europe may just be the setting of the story. Seemingly, the conflict remains here in Kapu. It is in this conflict where she seeks the logical resolution, the whys and wherefores of a fair and just life, as *Tatay* and *Nanay* have taught us. "Why is everything the same or even worse? We haven't done anything at all."

As we go into the poultry section where they sell *balut*, a vendor greets us to tell us that his son, Joshua is doing well and is now employed at the Department of Social Welfare of the local government unit. Who is Joshua, she asks. I tell her that he is one of our scholars who just graduated from college. Oh yes, the grandson of Manay Juana.

"Manay Juana! We were friends with Manay Juana. She was a great, articulate woman." She tells the *balut* vendor who regales her with a short anecdote of how Manay Juana and our brother were together in the same job. The *balut* vendor smiles at me knowingly, too, assuring me. I understand that he knows my work. Then he takes a dozen *balut*, wraps them carefully and puts it into our basket. "No, no, this is too much." I say. "We'll pay for this." But the man waves us off and Fatima accepts the gift gracefully and we move on.

"You see, the poor are so much more generous than the rich. If he wants to give, then we

must accept." I secretly admire Fatima for having remembered Manay Juana and for accepting the gift. She is so much like one of us, the poor people who help each other, the kind and generous peasant of our street like Domingo and his children Veron and Catalina who took care of our senile parents.

"I hate the rich." She says with emphasis. This must be the nth time that she has said this. This is the catchphrase that she uses to describe the life of her erstwhile rich friends, one of whom she tried to visit but couldn't because her doors were locked.

"You must live in the mountains with me. No doors are locked. All the peasant huts are open and we are welcome everywhere," I tell her. "Yes, I must," she says, "in Kapu, all our neighbors are our guards. Our neighbors take care of us. But why are there so many children? Why are they not in school?" Again I try to comfort her with words like. "At least we have a small scholarship program. This is all that we can do. To help a few. We can't change Kapu, nor this town, nor the entire country."

She doesn't seem convinced. The problems of poverty and population are a recurrent question that seems to worry her even during the busy marketing hours. "But we must ask the priest why there are so many children. I will go to church and ask him."

"No, don't ask him. The church is against the Reproductive Health Bill. You will be disappointed."

We stop to look at the *ukay-ukay*. "Look, and only for five pesos!" she puts up a cotton blouse to inspect it. "Haha, only five pesos! And will I look like a teenager in this!"

"Do you also wear *ukay ukay* in Europe?"

"Yes, of course I do. I live a very simple life so I can afford the best things that Europe has to offer. "And what is this?" I ask. "Well you know, the theater, cinema, good food, music, jazz, and travel. Next year I will go to Kenya to watch the animals migrate."

We go to the coconut section. Are there coconuts in Kenya? She doesn't answer. She is momentarily diverted by the grating machine and the presser. "I used to hate grating coconuts. Now we can have it all in a few minutes."

"And this is what you call progress," I say.

"But too many children," she shoots back at me. We find ourselves at the ready-meal section. Veron and Ana are both there, cooking. They invite us to eat *kwek-kwek*. We decline. Smoke, dirt, crowd, dust, food, motorcycles, everything is here. Maybe we should buy *pinangat*, I tell her. She gives in. I know she doesn't like it (because of images that have stuck in her mind) but Alejandro likes it, so she buys a bowl. Again she haggles with the vendor. She likes to haggle so much, it is a tradition she has learned from her youth; it is the act

that connects her to the poor peasants. "Here in the market we are same same."

I don't know how to tell her, but in my heart, Fatima, in her old nagging way, has continued to help me understand a lot of things. Her restless questioning is actually balm to the difficult life I have chosen. Her unmitigated anger at the rich and their lavish lifestyles is an affirmation of the world we are fighting for, a world where the poor children of Kapu will hopefully have the same opportunities as the children of BF Homes. Her insistence to see and live in the poorest district of our town for even a month or two, is a full appreciation of her roots and the principles that our parents have taught us: to be fair and just at all times even as we try to enjoy life to the fullest.

She may be in the 20th floor of her apartment in Europe, and I in my mountains, but I know we stand together, side by side, asking the same questions and working for the answers as deeply and as passionately as our parents did.

Scrabble

We have played scrabble ever since I can remember, maybe as early as when I first began to recognize the printed word. In '64 my eldest sister who was then working abroad as a nurse in a hospital in London sent us a set, together with a beautiful blue-eyed walking doll for my birthday. I was very proud of the doll and it has been passed on to a niece when I was too old to play with it, but the scrabble set has stayed on.

To my mind, the scrabble set has grown more stable and smooth, like a well-worn family antique and the mute witness to our growing up. The wooden tiles are still perfect in the more than 5 decades of its existence through innumerable games. From the hundred tiles, only one was lost, the letter E. My brother has tried to replace this letter from other sets he bought but the texture simply wouldn't fit; it is rather like a wayward scar from a bullet wound on my thigh. Even the board, which is made of frail material has withstood the test of time; the colors are still intact. The red of the triple word score is still an inviting red; the dark blue of the triple letter score, a real blue. My mother has been the faithful custodian of this priceless family heirloom.

I first learned scrabble from Fr. Arellano, our town's parish priest who knew so many Latin words he always beat us, my sister and I. From

him I learned the connection of root words—luz—light, lighten, enlighten, delight, etc. Or acto—act, actual, action, actuate, enact, react, counteract, active, activist.

When Martial Law was declared and my brother was abducted and imprisoned at a military camp, I wanted to bring him the scrabble set but my mother advised against it “They wouldn’t understand the gesture,” she said. “They might think we are devising means for his escape.” I didn’t push. The idea was not preposterous. Once during a visit, the guard dismantled the siopao we brought because “we could be carrying letters from the underground.” Besides, how can we play behind bars anyway?

To while away our own tension and confusion, it was my other brother and I who played, linking and creating words that magically soothed our worries away.

Very soon, and totally disillusioned with the system, I was in the mountains myself, trying to teach scrabble to my peasant friends. How come I knew so many words in English while they knew so few? Wasn’t I just making it up? And they would laugh at me and at my words. I didn’t have the heart to argue; to each his own language. The more important thing was to communicate. Besides, wasn’t I a moron myself at the local dialects?

Vacation time was different. It was scrabble time! We would sit on the porch, my brothers and I (the other sisters having flown by then to other lands) and play the game from morning till night or from night till morning whenever the spirit moved us. "Game!" my brother would shout, a gleam in his eyes. Words and ideas would crop up and we would laugh... it was the magical hour for all of us.

From these scrabble games I learned to know my siblings, their temperaments and quirks; their foibles and follies, their dreams and visions. We had started to live diametrically opposed lives then—they in agriculture that promised a much better harvest for the farmers and I in my mountains with the peasant guerillas. But in a sense we were all revolutionaries to a cause. Our concern for the masses interlocked where our methods diverged. "How could you ever change anything when there is fear?" my brother would ask me. What he meant was the armed struggle. And I would answer back with a question: "Why not? No fear is greater than poverty and violence brought about by the system. If we don't change the structure, how could we change anything?" then he'd go to specifics "How about the capital? Where do you get the capital?"

No matter where the conversation ended, it always ended in mutual respect. I admired him for his ideas but more so for his practice. His sense

of fairness and honesty somehow challenged me to be faithful to my mountains and to my guerrilla life. We were kins after all, and the scrabble games were the affirmation of this kinship.

This year we decided to find out, once and for all, who should get the crown as scrabble champ. For each of us, coming from different poles, the journey was like a pilgrimage. It was particularly difficult for me, coming from an interior front where I had to traverse so many mountains, serpentine rivers, a multitude of checkpoints and the infinite fear of getting ambushed or captured on the road. But finally, gratefully, I was there!

In no time at all we were seated on the porch, shaking with laughter at our stories. All my sisters were there too—imperfect but powerful in their own fields. Our children stayed on the periphery and watched us with amusement as they saw us expressing ourselves and having fun.

And Mother? As usual she was the official scorer, arguing, gaining a deeper insight into the lives we all had chosen separately and away from home. With Father's quiet presence, the family seemed to embrace us all in a wonderful celebration of life and self-giving...

More than 50 years have passed and the scrabble set is still there, waiting for a game, ready to weave words and have fun with us. Whenever my brother and sisters are here, we never fail to have a game or two. Our eyesight may be a little less

sharp now and sometimes we have to talk a little louder to hear each other but our words, as with ourselves, have definitely become richer, wiser and more graciously interconnected with the world.

Nothing wrong can happen now

1.

*Looking at these photographs
of family and friends
on Christmas day
in their red green frocks
I almost cannot recognize them now,
Nieces and nephews, friends and neighbors
(only the eager eyes of baby Joseph
popping from the pages seem warm and real.)
But they are my relatives, I tell myself;
Would I know them? Would they know me?
If we meet on the streets or in the mountains
Would they recognize their kin?
Would we speak the same language?*

2.

*Was it only yesterday we had this picture taken
On a boulder that once lived
In the wombs of a volcano?
Long before Junior named us Loud, Deep, Awake
And his father he would have christened Fun,
If he didn't go away to live in his marble house
Where he can no longer race
with the rising of the sun.
Behind those bars,
you had your picture taken without me
But that was only for the press; here I am still alive
Give me now my winnings, declare me as the champ!*

3.

*Tell me now of Machu Picchu and its heights
And the poetry of Pablo and Amado
Tell me of the plays you've seen
and friends you've met throughout the world.
Tell me all the sad and funny stories
of your flight,
the winter palaces, the deserts, the slums
the red and purple leaves of your home
Tell me all the news and struggles of the oppressed
Of the workers and the peasants in foreign lands*

4.

*I can only smile as I go around
the mountains and rivers that is my world
unhampered, free
and cautiously incognito:
Now a sister, now a Moro woman
Later a provinciana in a wig;
We are never the same person twice
For war is a battle of wits
And the enemy lurks
in the black sands of Linamon
And in the roasted squids of Oroquieta.
But we are faster and we have the masses.
We move before the sun rises
or the angels of death take notice.
At least you are there to protect me
And to dictate those prison notes
Nothing wrong can happen now
The book will be published
And he will be free.*

Did you meet with the women today?

*Did you meet with the women today?
Did you watch their open sores
and throbbing veins as they spoke
of the terrible frontiers they had to cross
and the wanton masters they had to serve
so their children could live a life
away from the land of waste and hunger?*

*Did you meet with the women today?
Did you talk to them and listen to their tales?
Proud survivors of a fragmented race
Rebecca and Maria, Juana and Rosalia—
No matter who they are, or where they come from
Their names are meshed into our lives
We own them and they own us
Disparate branches from a common root.*

*Did you meet with the women today?
Did you comfort them as you've always done
With balsam, food and songs?
Did you pour new blood into their veins
So they'd wake up from their slumber?
Did you regale them with wondrous tales
Of your sister in the mountains?*

*Did you meet with the women today?
Did they sing a song for you? Did they dance?
Did they give you wisdom, joy and grace?
Was it a happy event?
Or did they cry their sorrows unto your lap?
Did they embrace you into their fold
And sang a song of love and freedom?*

Did you meet with the women today?

Haiku*1*

*Red gumamela
Will you sing for the people
A song of freedom?*

2

*When the winds broke their cages
All the fishes took flight
Into the vast blue ocean*

3

*Blades of angry waves
Tore the cages and the nets
And freed the fishes*

4

*Typhoon Pablo blew away
Our old rusted roof
So we must replace it*

5

*Rose petals may soon wither
Iron bars may rust
The mountains live forever*

Warriors, Poets, Friends



Coffeeshop

For Tam & Leslie

*Words do come alive
When I'm in your coffee shop.
Is it your coffee? Or your gadget?
Or just by being there
Spending precious moments of the war
Laughing at everything and nothing.
Humor is the company of soulmates
The gentle balm of illnesses.
(if Marx were here, perhaps he, too,
Would smile, his teeth all brown
His beard all white). Nothing downs us
Broken arms and broken hearts (now mended)
The capture of a Red warrior (now released)
Even the death of a dear comrade hastens
The birth of young revolutionaries.
The war moves on, as everything must
And we shall savor every sip.
The fog lifts, yields to sunshine
Brilliant, warm and brave.*

A Recipe for the Rev

*For now we shall need all the
Cooks and bakers of the land
To keep our warriors fit and strong
And our cadres healthy and on the go.
We shall put into the boiling cauldron
All the ingredients of sound practice
Culled from a thousand kitchens and
From many years of serving the people.
Make it hot and spicy now with
Stories of heroes and villains
Add a pinch of humor laced with laughter
With just the right amount of love and
With lots and lots of patience.*

*And so we thank you, dear Mayls
For gracing our kitchen, deep in the forest
Under the wind and rain.*

Curly

*I see your curly hair
In the growing bud
Of a young fern
Sprouting here and there
Saying hi to everyone
Without fear nor apprehension
With neither sadness nor condescension
A young leaf out
To meet the sky
A young warrior out
To conquer the world
The grandchild of
Datu Mangulayon*

Ode to Teodora, in January

*Glad am I that we must live
on two sides of the earth
(like the unity of opposites)
then we have reason to see each other
and celebrate the weather,
or mourn the passing of an old
and battered year.
The sun came in hot and early today
as it tried to rectify the storm
or seemingly impatient for your coming;
And happy; so happy we are alive
the storm didn't catch us this time.
So many perished, though
so many lived: the young and the old
tenacious roots of ancient trees;
warm, cold, sky, wind, waters.
Everything and nothing all at once,
trees falling and breaking
the howling wind, swirling mud
wreaking havoc bringing death,
leaving only the skeleton of a forest.*

*All is silence now
but the beating of a frightened heart;
there is life still in a blade of a grass;
our umbilical cords are still intact,
tied closely to the earth,
its memories preserved
in the dusty alleyways of Kapu and
in the bosom of the mountains,
a unity of opposites.
First world, third world
what does it matter,
you're here now and I am out
of the enemy's terrain.
invisible and unafraid,
amorphous with the crowd
and dressed in many forms,
we both are rich, we both are poor
our experiences bind us
molding and remolding us
to live life fully, constantly
serving the people.*

*You have circled the globe,
I have circled the mountains,
rich with the smile
of peasants and comrades,
you have traversed so many roads
and hurdled the cruelties
of a fierce and foreign land.
I have been lost in the forest many times
and rescued again and again,
each time warmer, wiser,
freer from the shackles of tradition
discarding the old and building the new
each taking a different path
but arriving in the same direction.*

To a Young Comrade

*And I can never thank you enough
For bringing the music into our lives
and a patch of sunlight
into our cold abode.*

*I hear the tune of hope
and everything falls in its place
stones, rocks, trees
the masses and the comrades—
the symphony of our people's war.*

*You are truly our hope
young comrade
and I shall live a decade more
with you on the flute and the guitar
to the staccato of gunfire
and the tune of the people's march.*

On Conducting CSC with the Aged Warrior of the South

*You have traversed these mountains
a thousand times
You are part of the terrain now, a moving
Figure of the people's war,
Restless as the leaves of ancient trees,
Stirred by the east wind,
Always moving, always changing
Trying to configure the symbols and
This maze of contradictions.
Pray tell me all your stories now
The never ending tale, the liquid fire
The battles of Lamlisi and Paglidong
The open skulls and dismembered arms thrown
Into the burial grounds of Tarpol and Mastera
Show us all the follies of our ignorance
The multilayered chamber of events
The unchartered territories of our guerilla base
Tell everything as they happened
Open all the throbbing wounds, spare no one
Every arrow to each target, that,
From the bloodied strands of your remembrances
We may untie the knots of our unknowing
And hopefully shall we be freed*

Cadres

*Tactical offensives and alliances
mass actions and mass movements
guerilla zones and guerilla bases
Party building and ideological campaigns
Every phase of this war has its
brand of waiting*

*Not too early nor too late
We coordinate each and every little part
into one collective whole.*

*And we wait for promising cadres
to grow and bloom.*

*We teach them what we know
and wait for their initiatives
Tempering them till they are ripe to lead
squads, platoons or companies,
provinces and regions. We hone them
till they know the art of waiting,
the art of being one with the seasons*

*In camp we wait for situational reports
before doing any action.*

*Waiting is also wisdom
good sense and good timing
and in our war, a way of life.*

Terrorist?

*Why do they call us terrorist?
Is it because we side with the oppressed?
Or because we unmask the thieves
and robbers who steal from us?
Is it because we resist
The foreign monsters
Who continue to enslave us?
Why do they call us terrorist?
Is it because we care for the sick & wounded
Plant crops and trees, teach the children?
Or is it because we fight for justice,
Distribute free land and
Organize the people to
Build their own strength?*

*Then call us terrorist if you may
But grant us the chance to do
What we are meant to do:
To serve the people, to the very end.
Until the terror of greed is effaced
And plunder is brought to an end
Until we cease to fight each other
And are equal, fair and just.
Until we can call each other
By our one true name, Comrade.*

For Bully, My Editor

*How should we measure time?
In days or weeks or birthdays?
In stages or substages of the war, or
In the ticking of the clock before the blast?
Time, indeed, is relative and
Certainly protracted. And that is why, perhaps
We are always racing against time.
I look at you, at the worry lines
Etched on your dear, familiar face
Like steady reminders of myriad tasks
And commitments that must be met.
While we, we can only watch
In silent awe and affection, as
Impatient and patient all at once
You try to put cadence and order
In the household of our mountains
and the idiosyncrasies of this war,
Always a step ahead of everything:
Science and Art all in one.
Even in editing you strive for accuracy and grace
And I thank you, that after all these years
After the interchange of words/no words
You haven't stopped teaching me to write.*

You will live, Ka Joven

And I wish I could be in a place where I could work in virtual peace and quiet. Without thinking about drones or death or imprisonment. Morbid thoughts. I know this is the safest place for me, a fortress, where one can move away from danger because we are surrounded by people who genuinely care for us, entire communities along the perimeter who are constantly on the watch for the mad dogs. The evil eye of imperialist drones are no match to the vigilance and ingenuity of our guerilla forces; having withstood 50 years of fighting the world's most rabid superpower.

Yes, we haven't won the war yet, but we have certainly begun the process of decolonizing our people through meaningful changes in the way we think and do. A long, a very long and tortuous task. I am in my 'sunset years' now. Would I be able to see the fruits of our labor? Would I see the Red flag flying high in the 7,100 islands of our country? Perhaps, or perhaps not. But does it matter? Here we have started to build the society of free men and women where there is genuine concern for the common good; where through our collective labor we create our food and all the basic necessities of life without exploiting and oppressing anyone.

The process itself, this rough road that goes uphill to come down again; this thorny and

meandering path, this maze where we try to find our way, checking and rechecking our maps, we fall, we rise, we fall again and rise again, never losing hope, always looking forward: this for me is sufficient to say I am living my life to the fullest. 50 years of struggle! The longest revolution in the world! And I salute the Filipino people and all the revolutionaries who have made this possible. *Mabuhay! Mabuhay tayong lahat!*

... at fifty

*every year, at an appointed time and place
we stop to watch the star, consult our maps
the masses invite us to their nipa huts
for a meal of suman, luy-a, peanuts.
we sit awhile and talk,
the peasants smile, proudly pointing
to their communal lands and crops,
fruits of struggle in the countryside.
“come to the krm meeting tomorrow,”
they invite us, filled with quiet joy
the sheer power of their hands
assure us of good harvest now
and in the years to come.
more talk flow, time flies:
50 years! and the masses are as warm as ever.
truly we have come a long way, so the figures say:
tens of thousands of party members and
red fighters in more than a hundred fronts;
with millions of organized masses
throughout the land.
now a child runs to us and asks:
a gift? is there a gift for me?
yes, we say, the gift of a Red star shining
brightly in the sky signifying a great harvest.*

Good days are coming

*Good Days are coming
As uncle Ho would say
Nothing ever stops
Everything changes
Yellow flowers turn red
Like a shy bride blushing
In a flash the universe
Sheds its old feathers*

*Granaries are filled
with golden grains
Mad dogs are on a leash
Streets are free of litter
Drones have lost their eyes
And tyrants cry in defeat*

*The people's building
Glitters in the sun
A proud mountain
showing off green buds
And we stand up
to watch the world
Rebuilding itself and
We are filled with hope.*

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